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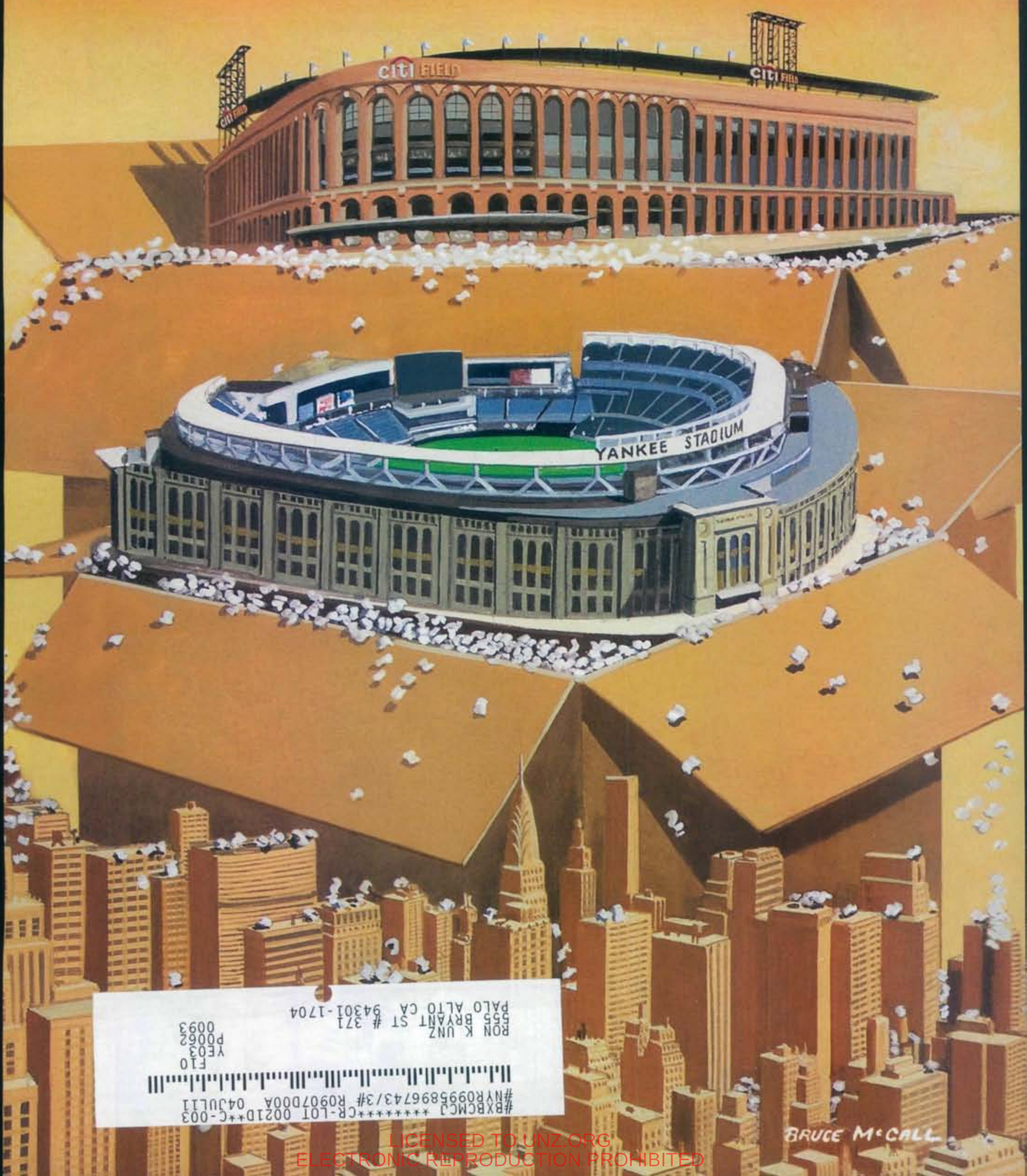
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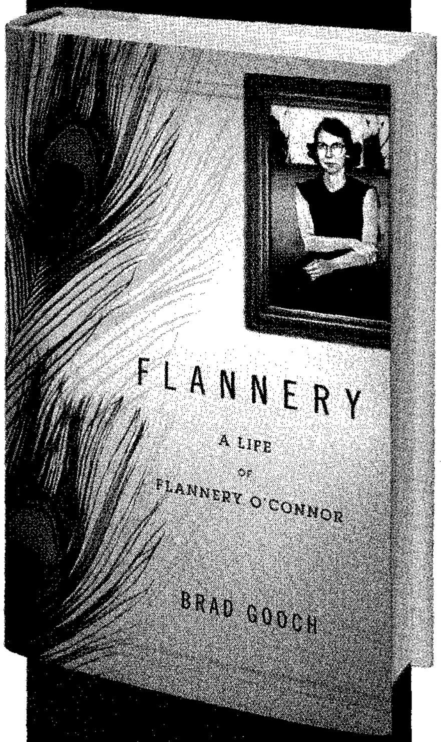

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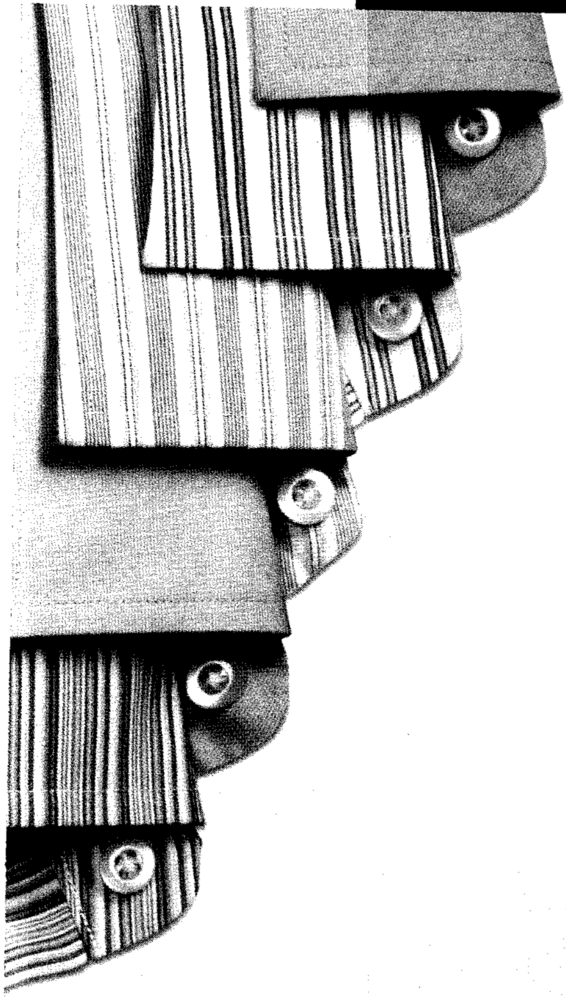

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Atul Gawande ("Hellhole," p. 36), a staff writer, is an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and at the Harvard School of Public Health, and the author of "Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance."

David Owen (Comment, p. 21) will publish "Green Metropolis," based on a 2004 *New Yorker* article, in September.

David Sedaris ("Author, Author?," p. 26) has written several humor books, including "When You Are Engulfed in Flames," which comes out in paperback in June.

Alec Wilkinson ("What Would Jesus Bet?," p. 30) will publish his ninth book, "The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger," next month.

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Garret Keizer (Poem, p. 50) has published poems and essays in *Agni*, *Image*, and *Harper's*. He lives in Vermont.

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Mary Jo Bang (Poem, p. 66) won a National Book Critics Circle Award for "Elegy," a collection of poems. Her new book, "The Bride of E," comes out this fall.

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Bruce McCall (Cover) is a regular contributor of art and humor pieces. "Marveltown" is his first children's book.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM
Audio: *Evan Osnos* on the recession in China. / The Political Scene, a weekly conversation hosted by *Dorothy Wickenden.* / Ask the Author: *David Owen* takes questions about the economy and ecology. / The Book Club finishes "Revolutionary Road." / Blogs: *Steve Coll* deciphers the stimulus bill, *Avi Zenilman* and *Amy Davidson* follow the news, *Richard Brody* talks about movies, plus posts by *Hendrik Hertzberg, James Surowiecki,* and others, as well as the Book Bench, the Cartoon Lounge, and Goings On. / Animated cartoons and the caption contest. / A complete archive of every issue, back to 1925.

THE MAIL

UPDIKE AND CHEEVER

I have read John Updike over the years, mostly in *The New Yorker*, but when I finished reading his poetry, I realized I had never fully appreciated his gifts as a writer ("Endpoint," March 16th). His poem "Peggy Lutz, Fred Muth," dated December 13, 2008, is strikingly crafted and as powerful and moving a poem as one is apt to encounter anywhere, in any generation. It appears that Updike was not only a fine writer but also a good friend. We should all be so fortunate to have a friend like him to remember our brief existence on earth in verse.
Richard Austin Healy
Clifton Park, N.Y.

John Cheever's "The Swimmer" might be part of a canon long gone, but to me, when I first read it, in 1983, it was a revelation: both fantastical and real, lush and local, it gave language to the empty repression and small resistances of the suburban life that surrounded me (Books, by John Updike, March 9th). Rereading it now, I found Neddy Merrill's desires and fears still clearer; he knew "he could not go back," even as the return to the empty house surprised and scared him. This is what it feels like to be caught between the safety of a trap and the intermittent desire to escape it. This might be a reference to Cheever's own struggles, but it also helped me understand my own. As more has come to light about Cheever, it hasn't changed the relief of exposure that his work brings to the suffocation of the suburbs. And how fitting a coda for Updike that we get to hear him weigh in on Cheever, since this is their shared territory. The urge to write is sometimes the only way to make sense of the self, and Cheever did it in the face of nearly debilitating fragilities. That for me is the redemption of his work.
Andrea L. Volpe
Cambridge, Mass.

THE RULE OF LAW

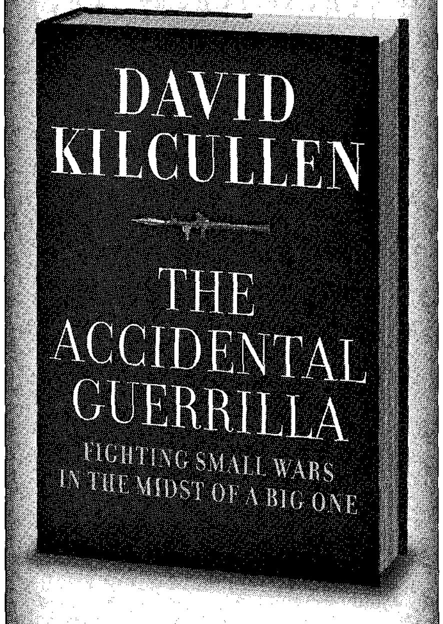
Neal Katyal's support for a separate system to deal with "the very small handful of cases in which patently dangerous people cannot be tried" amounts to a continuation of Bush-era policies of detention without charges, forced confession, and prolonged isolation in direct violation of and disregard for due process ("The Hard Cases," by Jane Mayer, February 23rd). The criminal-justice system may not be perfect, but it has been successful in prosecuting domestic terrorists, and other types of dangerous criminals as well, and there is no reason that it cannot be used for non-citizens facing terrorism charges. The issue is not whether Ali Saleh Kahla al-Marri is in fact a terrorist, or whether there exists sufficient evidence to convict him, but whether people suspected of terrorism should be exempt from constitutional due-process requirements. Restoring the world's confidence in the United States' commitment to the rule of law requires applying our most fundamental principles of justice in every case, not just when doing so is easy.
Lauren Fouda
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Mayer correctly notes that Marri and other people similarly detained are "suspects." Therein lies the fatal flaw of (all programs of) preventive detention. Because preventive detention bypasses the proper determination of guilt, it violates a fundamental tenet of our legal system—no punishment without a crime. Presumably, we punish people for past acts in violation of the law, not for possible future ones. It was the Obama Administration's predecessors who forced the disastrous choice between "our safety and our ideals." It is now up to the President to right this detestable and far-reaching wrong.
Edwin M. Schur
New York City

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. All letters become the property of The New Yorker and will not be returned; we regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

"Kilcullen's influence... cannot be overstated."
—Tom Ricks, author of *The Gamble*



"Kilcullen's central concept of 'the accidental guerrilla' is brilliant and the policy prescriptions that flow from it important."
—Fareed Zakaria, author of *The Post-American World*

"Few experts understand counterinsurgency and counterterrorism better."
—George Packer, *The New Yorker*

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—*Publishers Weekly* (Starred Review)

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The Wooster Group's "La Didone," at St. Ann's Warehouse. Photograph by Lisa Kereszi.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE
WILSON'S WORLD

Bartlett Sher directs August Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," the second installment of the Century Cycle. The drama, set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, premièred on Broadway in 1988; the revival, starring Chad Coleman and Ernie Hudson, is in previews at the Belasco. (See page 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
IT TAKES TWO

The powerful and protean vocalist P. J. Harvey has, throughout her career, worked closely with the guitarist and producer John Parish. The two were early bandmates before Harvey became famous; he played on and helmed her 1995 album, "To Bring You My Love"; and they've released two albums together, the second of which comes out this week. The pair makes a rare live appearance, at the Fillmore New York at Irving Plaza. (See page 9.)

ART
NEVER TOO LATE

The Picasso biographer John Richardson has curated a show of the Spaniard's rarely seen late works—ranging from scenes of musketeers, matadors, and prostitutes to sexually frank portraits of the artist's wife Jacqueline—at the Gagosian gallery in Chelsea. (See page 12.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
MATA MATTERS

Over the past decade, the MATA Festival, launched by Philip Glass, has grown into the city's leading showcase for young compositional talent. This year's edition, featuring such groups as Ne(x)tworks and So Percussion, begins this week at (Le) Poisson Rouge. (See page 14.)

MOVIES
INDEPENDENT NEWS

The first week of the New Directors/New Films series, screening at Film Society of Lincoln Center and MOMA, features a handful of notable new American independent films, including "Amreeka," about a Palestinian immigrant family; "Barking Water," in which a couple embarks on a trip through rural Oklahoma; and "Stay the Same Never Change," about young girls growing up in Kansas City. (See page 17.)

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THE THEATRE
OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

CHASING MANET
Primary Stages presents a new comedy by Tina Howe, about a painter from Boston and her friend, who plan to escape a nursing home via the QE2 to Paris. Jane Alexander stars; Michael Wilson directs. In previews. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

EXIT THE KING
Geoffrey Rush (in his Broadway début), Susan Sarandon, Lauren Ambrose, and Andrea Martin star in the Eugène Ionesco comedy, about a king who refuses to relinquish control of his kingdom. Translated and directed by Neil Armfield. In previews. Opens March 26. (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

FINIAN'S RAINBOW
The final production of its season, "Encores!" presents this musical from 1947, with music by Burton Lane, a book by E. Y. (Yip) Harburg and Fred Saidy, and lyrics by Harburg. Jim Norton, Kate Baldwin, Jeremy Bobb, and Cheyenne Jackson star; Warren Carlyle directs. March 26-29. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL
The Shakespeare in the Park production moves to Broadway. Diane Paulus directs a cast of twenty-seven, including Gavin Creel and Will Swenson. In previews. Opens March 31. (Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

HAMLET
Theatre for a New Audience presents Shakespeare's tragedy, starring Christian Camargo, Alvin Epstein, and Jennifer Ikeda. David Esbjornson directs. In previews. Opens March 26. (The Duke on 42nd Street, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

HAPPINESS
A musical directed and choreographed by Susan Stroman, with a book by John Weidman, music by Scott Frankel, and lyrics by Michael Korie, about New Yorkers trapped on a subway train. In previews. Opens March 30. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

IRENA'S VOW
Tovah Feldshuh stars in a new play by Dan Gordon, about Irena Gut Opdyke, who worked as a housekeeper for a Nazi official and went on to shelter Jewish refugees. In previews. Opens March 29. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

JAILBAIT
Deirdre O'Connor's drama, about a pair of fifteen-year-old girls who go to a Boston night club and pretend they are college students, inaugurates Cherry Lane's new theatre, the Cherry Pit. Suzanne Agins directs. Opens March 25. (155 Bank St. 212-868-4444.)

JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE
Bartlett Sher directs a Lincoln Center Theatre production of August Wilson's play, set in Pittsburgh in 1911. The cast includes Chad Coleman, Ernie Hudson, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Roger Robinson, and Arliss Howard. In previews. (Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

KNIVES AND OTHER SHARP OBJECTS
As part of the Public LAB season, Felix Solis directs Raúl Castillo's play, about two Latina sisters who move in with their rich relatives in Texas. Previews begin March 27. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

MARY STUART
Janet McTeer and Harriet Walter star in Peter Oswald's new version of Friedrich Schiller's play from 1800, about Elizabeth I and her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots. Phyllida Lloyd directs. Previews begin March 30. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

NEXT TO NORMAL
This musical, about a dysfunctional family, which opened at Second Stage last year, has music by Tom Kitt and a book and lyrics by Brian Yorkey. Michael Greif directs. Previews begin March 27. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

1984
Godlight Theatre Company presents Alan Lyddiard's adaptation of George Orwell's novel. Opens March 25. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

AN ORESTEIA
Classic Stage Company presents a piece by Anne Carson, which gathers the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to tell the story of the House of Atreus. Part One is directed by Brian Kulick and Gisela Cardenas; Part Two is directed by Paul Lazar and choreographed by Annie-B Parson. In previews. (136 E. 13th St. 212-352-3101.)

REASONS TO BE PRETTY
Neil LaBute's comic drama, in which a man's comments about a co-worker's pretty face get back to his girlfriend, moves to Broadway. Marin Ireland, Steven Pasquale, Piper Perabo, and Thomas Sadoski star; Terry Kinney directs. In previews. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROCK OF AGES
The eighties-era rock musical, written by Chris D'Arienzo, about an ambitious young rocker and a small-town girl who meet at a failing Hollywood rock club, transfers to Broadway. Kristin Hanggi directs. In previews. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

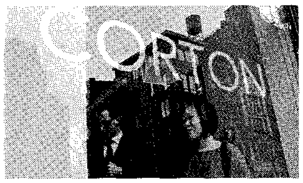
TARTUFFE
At the Pearl, Gus Kaikkonen directs the Molière comedy. In previews. Opens March 30. (80 St. Marks Pl. 212-598-9802.)

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN
At the ArcLight, a comedy by Aurin Squire, about a young Kansas boy who starts an online relationship, under false pretenses, with a Marine stationed in Kabul. Opens March 25. (152 W. 71st St. 212-352-3101.)

THE TOXIC AVENGER
A new musical with a book and lyrics by Joe DiPietro ("I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change") and music and lyrics by David Bryan (of Bon Jovi), directed by John Rando ("Urinetown"), based on Lloyd Kaufman's 1985 film, about a New Jersey science student who is turned into a mutant superhero. In previews. (New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

WHY TORTURE IS WRONG, AND THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM
The world première of an absurdist comedy by Christopher Durang, about a woman who fears that her husband is a terrorist and that her parents work for the government. Laura Benanti stars; Nicholas Martin directs. In previews. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

TABLES FOR TWO
CORTON



239 West Broadway (212-219-2777)—In 2000, Paul Liebrandt, a consumptive-looking Brit who apprenticed under Marco Pierre White, Raymond Blanc, and Pierre Gagnaire, became the youngest chef, at the age of twenty-three, to earn three stars from the New York *Times*—and, along with them, a reputation for possessing a romantic cast of mind. Within months, he had left the restaurant, Atlas. His next job, at Papillon, lasted only a year. Then there was his stint at Gilt, which people thought was brilliant, and which didn't last long, either. After a couple of years cooking privately, Liebrandt is probably sick of having to relive his temperamental youth. Suffice it to say that he once helped stage a dinner where blindfolded guests ate jelly off a naked woman. At Corton, which Liebrandt has conceived with the veteran restaurateur Drew Nieporent as "three-star dining stripped down," the mood is clean and bright. With starry light fixtures in irregular shapes (one resembles a wand dipped in sparkling honey) and pristine white walls embossed with designs in the shape of tree branches, it could be a planetarium designed by Apple. One recent Friday night, a banquette toward the front of the room was occupied by no less a futurist than the Goldman Sachs C.E.O. Lloyd Blankfein.

What's surprising about Corton is the levity that Liebrandt—whom Gael Greene once called "the prince of discomfort food"—brings to the table. An amuse-bouche of foie-gras chantilly turns its stodgy components loose: served in a tiny bowl and layered like a sundae, it is light, heavy, springy, and crunchy all at once. For an appetizer of cod, squid, chorizo, and a slow-cooked farm egg, the waiter pours a little pitcher of pheasant consommé over the whole speckled mixture, making it sing in the manner of bubble and squeak. The squid is submerged in the soupiness, as though it's under the sea—a witty take. That impression, and the dish's complexity, deepens as lukewarm foam on top gives way to a warmer, tidal broth. Liebrandt's cooking is the culinary equivalent of wordplay—an intellectual exercise cloaked in amusement—and, just occasionally, such as when he dresses up a foie-gras appetizer with a ruby-red skin of hibiscus-beet gelée, like a plum, he succumbs to the superfluous joke. Far more often, his japes are a pleasure. A coconut sorbet with dried currants and lime is a rum-raisin-flavored game of hide-and-seek. Petits fours come in Lucite boxes, bringing to mind pieces of costume jewelry, which, like Corton, is dazzling and not too heavy. (Open Mondays through Saturdays for dinner. Three-course prix-fixe menu $79, tasting menu around $120.)

—*Lauren Collins*

NOW PLAYING

BLITHE SPIRIT
Noël Coward's brilliant ghost play, from 1941, explores the connections between memory, mourning, and the erotic; it's a comic demonstration in which the dead's aggression toward the living confronts the aggression of the living toward the dead. The novelist Charles Condomine (Rupert Everett) has arranged a séance, as research for a murder mystery he's working on. In a posh drawing room that's as proper and sedate as Charles's sturdy second wife, Ruth (Jayne Atkinson), Madame Arcati (Angela Lansbury), the Martini-guzzling, Irving Berlin-loving local spiritualist, accidentally conjures up his late first wife, Elvira (Christine Ebersole). Under Michael Blakemore, one of the finest directors of farce around, Atkinson's fluting high dudgeon and Ebersole's flirtatious hostility create a terrific force field for Everett's droll reactions. The epitome of the swiftness that Coward admired in his players, Angela Lansbury scuttles expertly around the stage like a water bug—not a poltergeist but a whirlwind of idiosyncratic expertise. Together, the actors offer a master class in light comedy. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/23/09.) (Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

LA DIDONE
The U.S. première of the Wooster Group's production of Francesco Cavalli's opera, with a

NATALIE MATUTSCHOVSKY

libretto by Francesco Busenello, which tells the story of Aeneas and Dido, with a sci-fi slant. Elizabeth LeCompte directs. (St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779.)

GOD OF CARNAGE
The latest play by Yasmina Reza ("Art"), which opened in London last year, directed by Matthew Warchus. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE GOOD NEGRO
At the Public, Liesl Tommy directs Tracey Scott Wilson's play. (Reviewed in this issue.) (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

GREEK HOLIDAY
"Have you ever wanted somebody dead?" Debra (Sarah Knapp) asks her husband, Alex (Tommy Schrider), toward the climax of Mayo Simon's play, directed by Stephen Hollis. And, oh yes, both of these characters have entertained murderous fantasies about the other, fantasies that occasionally get played out before us. But the proceedings, set on a deserted Greek isle where the couple has gone to try to revive their failing marriage, never rise to the level of effective black comedy. Alex expresses contrition and humiliation over his affair with Janet (Kathleen McElfresh), seen in flashback, but what comes through most strongly is the playwright's loathing of both female characters. (Abingdon, 312 W. 36th St. 212-868-4444.)

IMPRESSIONISM
Jeremy Irons and Joan Allen star in this new play by Michael Jacobs, about the relationship between a photojournalist and a gallery owner. Jack O'Brien directs. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

INCIDENT AT VICHY
In Arthur Miller's 1964 play, set in France during the Second World War, ten men await inspection by German and French officials, unsure of why they've been detained. Their attempts to rationalize their presence become a heady exploration of guilt, fear, power, and complicity that, unfortunately, never quite transcends the realm of philosophical exercise. The Actors Company Theatre, whose explicit mission has always been to revive the lesser works of great playwrights, have given themselves quite a challenge with this strange little piece, which is receiving its first New York production in twenty-eight years. As is typical of minor Miller, texture and true psychology are sacrificed in the name of rhetoric, and the end results, despite the affecting historical context, are transparently didactic and, sadly, lifeless. The able cast tries its hardest and proof of Miller's genius is scattered throughout the writing, but the work feels like no more than an alluring museum piece. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

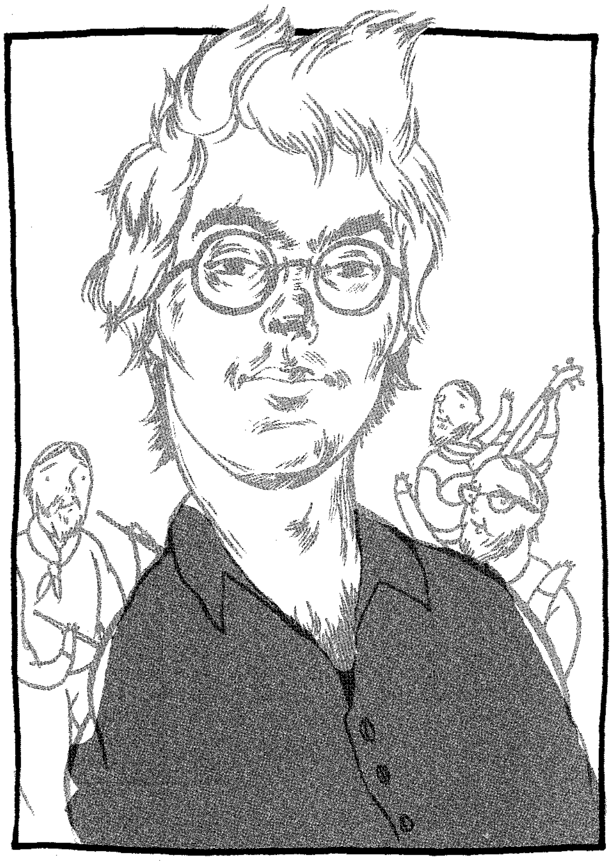
33 VARIATIONS
A musicology lecture disguised as an intellectual detective story within an emotional melodrama, written and directed by Moisés Kaufman. "I need to know what he saw in this waltz," says the play's dogged shamus, Dr. Katherine Brandt (Jane Fonda), a classical-music scholar who is in a race to finish her monograph before she succumbs to a motor-neuron disease. Kaufman's scenes may be clumsy, but the interplay between the stories of Beethoven and Brandt is elegant. The excitement of Beethoven's visionary genius doesn't extend to Kaufman's plot, however, whose simplistic shorthand is more televisionary. The play marks Fonda's return to the Broadway stage after forty-six years, but the role is no test of her emotional range. Her presence—with its curious amalgam of alertness and standoffishness—is a neat bit of typecasting; Fonda provides a sort of scaffolding of willpower and disdain that props up the ambitious Brandt. (3/23/09) (O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

LEAH HAYES

WEST SIDE STORY
Arthur Laurents directs the 1957 Bernstein-Sondheim-Robbins musical, for which he wrote the libretto. Matt Cavanaugh and Josefina Scaglione star. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

Also Playing

ASTRONOME: A NIGHT AT THE OPERA: Ontological-Hysteric, St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-352-3101. **AUGUST: OSAGE COUNTY:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **AVENUE Q:** Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **FIRE THROWS:** 3LD Art & Technology Center, 80 Greenwich St. 212-352-3101. Through March 28. **GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS:** Minetta Lane, 18 Minetta Lane. 212-307-4100. **HEDDA GABLER:** American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. Through March 29. **HEROES:** Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **HUMOR ABUSE:** City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **KASPAR HAUSER:** Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101. Through March 28. **OUR TOWN:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. **RUINED:** City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. **SHREK THE MUSICAL:** Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **THAT PRETTY PRETTY; OR, THE RAPE PLAY:** Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-868-4444. Through March 28. **THE WIDOWING OF MRS. HOLROYD:** Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-315-0231.



Elvis Perkins in Dearland, at the Bowery Ballroom.

NIGHT LIFE
ROCK AND POP

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—March 26: The blues-harmonica master **James Cotton.**

BEACON THEATRE
Broadway at 74th St. (800-745-3000)—March 26-28: The **Allman Brothers,** the Southern rockers from Macon, who, when they started out, in 1969, already seemed like battle-scarred veterans. Even after enduring periodic feuding, splinter groups, and devastating losses, these grizzled midnight riders can still bring down the house.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—March 25: **Elvis Perkins in Dearland.** The singer-songwriter Perkins, the son of the actor Anthony Perkins and the photographer Berry Berenson, has a sensibility that's part folk and part pop. His début solo album, "Ash Wednesday," was a song cycle centering on the death of his mother, who was on one of the planes that crashed into the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. He now has a proper band with a brass section and an organ player, and on their new self-titled release they give a moving weight to his poignant world view.

CANAL ROOM
285 West Broadway (212-941-8100)—March 26: Best known as the front man of Wall of Voodoo and the squawking voice on their hit single, "Mexican Radio," **Stan Ridgway** quit the seminal Los Angeles New Wave band in 1983 to pursue a solo career. Rife with noirish, deadpan narratives that fall midway between Johnny Cash and Mickey Spillane, Ridgway's solo work has retained his distinctive vocal style and oddball insights. He is currently on tour with a career-spanning show titled "Desert of Dreams: A Sandstorm of Song," and preparing a new album for release this summer.

CITY WINERY
143 Varick St. (212-608-0555)—March 27-28: **Marianne Faithfull.** Decades removed from her incarnation as a willowy flower child, Faithfull now sings in a rich, smoky voice that a baritone might admire, and her repertoire is just as deep. Her new record, "Easy Come, Easy Go," includes songs by Morrissey, Colin Meloy, of the Decemberists, Dolly Parton, and Brian Eno.

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—March 30: The **Hold Steady,** the pride of Brooklyn, plays brilliant homespun rock and roll that could bring Bruce Springsteen to his knees (in fact, he's a fan). March 26: When she was young, **P. J. Harvey** sang in a band called Automatic Dlamini, which was put together by a guitarist named **John Parish.** That band didn't last long, but Harvey went on to become famous as a female savior of rock and roll. Parish, who staked out a successful career as a producer, helped out along the way, producing her 1995 album, "To Bring You My Love." A year later, the two released the collaborative album "Dance Hall at Louse Point," and they've been back in the studio recently. Their latest effort, "A Woman a Man Walked By," comes out this week.

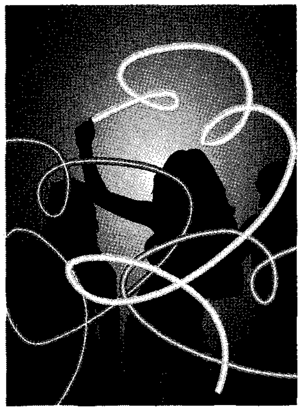
JALOPY
315 Columbia St., Red Hook, Brooklyn (718-395-3214)—March 31: On **Danny Schmidt's** new album, "Instead the Forest Rose to Sing," the songwriter and guitar-picker from Austin, Texas, ruminates about the meaning of money and wealth. His idiosyncratic, meticulously constructed folk songs are infused with intellect and quirkiness.

MUSIC HALL OF WILLIAMSBURG
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-486-5400)—March 29: **Primal Scream,** arguably the quintessential British indie band. Never locked into one sound for too long, the mercurial Scottish collective has dabbled in riff-laden garage rock, trippy dance music, blistering punk,

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
DANCE REVOLUTION

Whatever you call this new moment in dance music—Rave 4.0, House 9.0—it's a mistake to think of it as new, exactly. You can hear the pulse and the sounds of disco's stepchildren in Kanye West's "Flashing Lights" and Timbaland's "The Way I Are," and Lady Gaga's No. 1 hit "Just Dance" is the most explicit return yet of house music. More interesting work, as usual, is happening on the margins, with producers like London's Fake Blood, the Los Angeles duo Acid Girls, and a trio of New York d.j.s—Nick Catchdubs, DJ Ayres, and Jubilee—who hold a monthly party called Flashing Lights. Their description of the night's aesthetic is fairly straightforward: "house + disco + techno + rave." Recent Flashing Lights parties have been high-spirited, low-attitude events that recall the mood of New York City dance clubs from the early eighties, like Danceteria. Remember: the event is actually for dancers, rather than for people who need to text each other in public. Flashing Lights will be held on April 3rd at Studio B, in Greenpoint.

—Sasha Frere-Jones



jangly pop, and virtually all points in between since its early-eighties inception. Call it an insatiable musical versatility or simply an attention-deficit disorder. Their most recent album, "Beautiful Future," finds the band—led by the lanky Bobby Gillespie—trotting out busy electronic pop.

THE OLD KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—The Knitting Factory may have shut down operations in Manhattan (they're planning to move to Brooklyn, and they have outposts in Boise and Spokane, of all places), but they still have access to the Tribeca space for a few long-planned shows. March 28: **Ya Ho Wha 13** is a seventies Southern California psychedelic-rock band that grew out of a religious cult called the Source Family, which was founded by a former marine named Father Yod (né James Edward Baker). In 1973, this largely improvisational band of cult members began recording, generally tracking from three to six in the morning in Father Yod's garage after several hours of meditation. The records, reportedly some sixty-five in all, were printed in small numbers and sold at the group's Sunset Boulevard vegetarian restaurant, the Source. (Woody Allen famously ordered mashed yeast at the restaurant in the breakup scene in "Annie Hall.") After a long hiatus, the three constant members—the guitarist, Djin Aquarian, the bassist, Sunflower Aquarian, and the drummer, Octavius Aquarian—decided to bring their hippie-musical sound, replete with ecstatic group chanting and wild acid-rock guitar soloing, back.

ROSELAND
239 W. 52nd St. (800-745-3000)—March 26: The **Prodigy** became one of the biggest British electronic acts of the nineties following their breakout 1997 album, "The Fat of the Land," which combined the stealthy beats of rave music with the aggressive spectacle of rock. Incendiary videos for "Firestarter" and "Breathe" turned them into MTV staples, but they soon lost momentum. In 2004, the band's producer-leader, Liam Howlett, pruned the ranks for the album "Always Outnumbered, Never Outgunned" and abandoned the pantomime-punk theatrics that won them their initial success. Five years later, the Prodigy is back (with the pint-sized provocateur and vocalist Keith Flint reinstated). Their new album is called "Invaders Must Die."

SOUTHPAW
125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—March 27: The **Fleshtones** first burst onto New York City's punk scene in the late seventies, playing insouciant, stripped-down garage rock. Unabashedly retro, the Fleshtones cherry-picked the best bits of pop, surf music, rockabilly, and vintage R. & B. to create a visceral formula that sounded right at home alongside the racket of the day. Their sound was timeless. Three decades later, it is still exciting.

WEBSTER HALL
125 E. 11th St. (212-353-1600)—March 30: **Glasvegas,** from Scotland, plays glitzy, retro-leaning rock.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—March 24-April 11: The cabaret mainstay **KT Sullivan.**

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—March 30: The irrepressible saxophonist, flutist, and onstage cut-up **James Moody** is joined by a topnotch gang of familiar associates, including the trumpeters **Randy Brecker** and **Jon Faddis** and the saxophonist **Paquito D'Rivera,** in a benefit for the James Moody Scholarship Fund.

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—March 25-28: The Italian trumpeter **Enrico Rava** reassembles most of the first-rate ensemble that enlivened his excellent new album, "New York Days." The pianist **Stefano Bollani,** the saxophonist **Mark Turner,** and the drummer **Paul Motian** join him here. The bassist **Ben Street** fills in for Larry Grenadier.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—March 24-29: The **James Moody** quartet (see the B. B. King Blues Club & Grill) is joined by the trumpeter **Jon Faddis.**

CAFE CARLYLE
Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—Through March 28: The British vocalist **Barb Jungr** presents a new show, "The Men I Love," drawing on the work of Bruce Springsteen, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, and others.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—March 24-29: The veteran vocalist **Ernestine Anderson** receives hand-in-glove support from the saxophonist **Houston Person,** who honed his rapport with singers during a longtime collaboration with the late Etta Jones.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—March 26-29: **Larry Coryell,** a fusion-guitar deity who has never forsaken his bebop roots, welcomes the organist **Joey De Francesco.**

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Broadway at 60th St. (212-721-6500)—March 26-28: **Wynton Marsalis** and the **Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra,** just back from a national tour, settle in at home.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—March 25: On last year's album "Concerti," the ever-elegant guitarist **Gene Bertoncini** engaged in sympathetic interplay with a string quartet and a bassist. He performs with the same setup here. March 26-29: The singer **Kevin Mahogany** has long held a fascination with the pioneering vocalist Big Joe Turner, who effortlessly melded blues, jazz, and R. & B. Mahogany's Kansas City Revue ropes in the saxophonist **Red Holloway** and the singer **Miss Kathy Kosins** to expound on Turner's significant contributions.

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—March 27: Expect interaction of a decidedly open-ended variety when the veteran free-jazz bassist **Henry Grimes** performs duets with the experimentally minded guitarist **Marc Ribot.**

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—March 24-29: One of the last major surviving horn soloists to emerge from the big-band incubator, the saxophonist and flutist **Frank Wess** retains a silky tone and taut responses that belie his eighty-seven years.

ART
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—**"Cast in Bronze: French Sculpture from Renaissance to Revolution."** Through May 24. ♦ **"Raphael to Renoir: Drawings from the Collection of Jean Bonna."** Through April 26. ♦ **"Art of the Korean Renaissance, 1400-1600."** Through June 21. ♦ **"Pierre Bonnard: The Late Interiors."** Through April 19. ♦ **"Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard."** Through May 25. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—**"Martin Kippenberger: The Problem Perspective."** Through May 11. ♦ **"Performance 1: Tehching Hsieh."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Words in Freedom: Futurism at 100."** Through April 6. ♦ **"a shimmer of possibility: Photographs by Paul Graham."** Through May 18. ♦ **"Projects 89: Klara Liden."** Through June 8. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989."** Through April 19. ♦ **"The 2008 Hugo Boss**

QUICKHONEY

Prize: Emily Jacir." Through April 15. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—**"Jenny Holzer: Protect Protect."** Through May 31. ♦ **"Elad Lassry: Three Films."** Through April 30. ♦ **"Sites."** Through May 3. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"The Black List Project: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and Elvis Mitchell."** Through March 29. ♦ **"Burning Down the House: Building a Feminist Art Collection."** Through April 5. ♦ **"Unearthing the Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture."** Through May 10. ♦ **"Hernan Bas: Works from the Rubell Family Collection."** It's hard to ignore the enormous debt that Bas's paintings owe to the small-scale, tossed-off-sketch aesthetic of Elizabeth Peyton, Paul P., and Karen Kilimnik. (A few multi-figure, friezelike compositions also recall Henry Darger.) Nonetheless, these portraits of young men lounging in pastoral settings or floating on picturesque bodies of water have their own distinct appeal. Bas's terrain is the fey (titles like "Dandies, Pansies, and Prudes") and the literary (there are nods to Oscar Wilde and Herman Melville). But a self-conscious video installation—a winsome five-part projection of frolicking mermaids, accompanied by an overwrought sculptural tableau—dilutes the paintings' already watered-down charms. Through May 24. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Climate Change: The Threat to Life and a New Energy Future."** Through Aug. 16. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 25. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

ASIA SOCIETY
Park Ave. at 70th St. (212-288-6400)—**"Yang Fudong: Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest."** Through Sept. 13. (Tuesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 9.)

COOPER-HEWITT NATIONAL DESIGN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 91st St. (212-849-8300)—**"Fashioning Felt."** Warm, water-repellent, and practically waste-free to make, felt has been called a "protoplastic" because it can be thin or thick, soft or stiff, molded or carved. The matted and condensed wool textile is exhibited in a far-out range of forms, including a "flying carpet" sofa made from a single, rigid white panel and architectural molding studded with rosettes in dense, dark gray. Dresses by Andrea Zittel are both sturdy and stylish. A *kepenek*, or Turkish shepherd's cloak, is both a sleeping bag and a tent. The conservatory is transformed into a palace yurt, a sumptuous ceremonial pavilion, hung with a lacy felt canopy by Janice Arnold that reinterprets traditional Mongolian design. Through Sept. 7. ♦ **"Shazia Sikander Selects: Works from the Permanent Collection."** Through Sept. 7. (Open Mondays through Thursdays, 10 to 5, Fridays, 10 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, noon to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—**"Masterpieces of European Painting from the Norton Simon Museum."** Through May 10. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—**"Weird Beauty: Fashion Photography Now."** Through May 3. ♦ **"This Is Not a Fashion Photograph."** Through May 3. ♦ **"Edward Steichen: In High Fashion."** Through May 3. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, and Saturdays and Sundays, 10 to 6, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

JAPAN SOCIETY
333 E. 47th St. (212-752-3015)—**"KRAZY! The Delirious World of Anime, Manga, and Video Games."** Through June 14. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

NEUE GALERIE
1048 Fifth Ave., at 86th St. (212-628-6200)—**"Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913."** In 1905, four architecture students besotted with medieval woodcuts, African art, Edvard Munch, and Nietzsche formed a group in Dresden. They called themselves Die Brücke ("the bridge"), intent on spanning the chasm between the past and a utopian future. A century later, the quartet is showcased in its first significant American retrospective, with paintings, sculptures, and works on paper. Swirling, hallucinogenic landscapes and cityscapes by Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Erich Heckel, and Fritz Bleyl are joined by raw, haunting nudes and a handful of rough-hewn wooden sculptures. One of German Expressionism's most famous paintings is here: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's "Street, Dresden" (1908/1919). With blaring colors and urban pedestrians staring out at viewers like deer in the headlights, it remains one of the most unsettling and visionary images of the early-modern period. Through June 29. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6.)

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART
Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (718-592-9700)—**"Queens International 4."** Through April 26. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, noon to 5.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

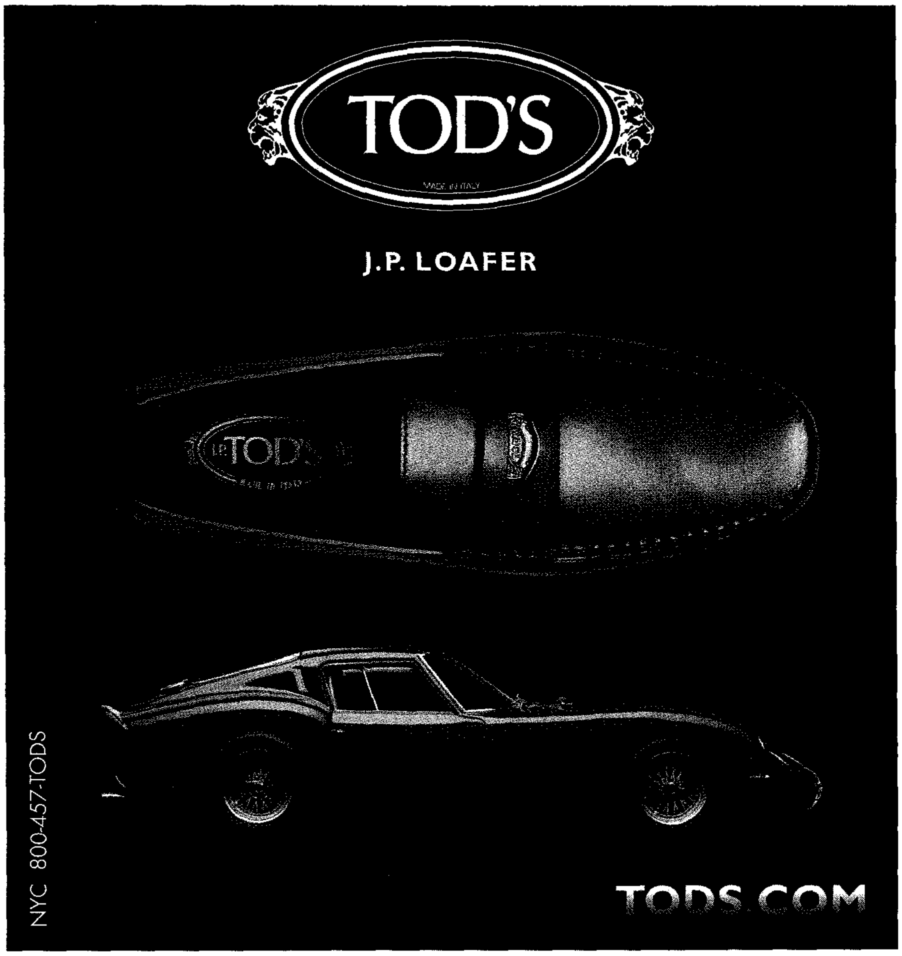
ROBERT D'ALESSANDRO
"Glory," the title of D'Alessandro's 1973 book of photographs, is as understated and as charged as his pictures, each of which includes an American flag. Still timely more than three decades later, twenty-five of those pointedly black-and-white images remind us that, where the stars and stripes are concerned, ambivalence, irreverence, and jingoistic display are nothing new. One of D'Alessandro's flags is partly covered by a Malcolm X poster, one hangs near a "Wanted" poster for H. Rap Brown, and another drapes the couch under a naked, long-haired man whose lower legs are missing. The mood is brooding and disillusioned; the humor, pitch black. Through May 9. (Gitterman, 170 E. 75th St. 212-734-0868.)

Short List

JAMES CASTLE: Knoedler, 19 E. 70th St. 212-794-0550. Through April 25. **JANE FREILICHER:** De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave. at 57th St. 212-262-5050. Through April 18. **DAN GRAHAM:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through March 28. **PAUL GRAHAM:** Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-445-0444. Through May 2. **RICHARD PHILLIPS:** Gagosian, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-744-2313. Through May 2. **FRANZ WEST:** Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 212-517-8677. Through April 25. **"VIVAT REX! THE FIVE-HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ACCESSION OF HENRY VIII":** Grolier Club, 47 E. 60th St. 212-838-6690. Through May 2.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

WALEAD BESHTY
Beshty makes big, abstract photograms that are as brainy as they are beautiful. Previous work in this vein involved folded or crumpled photographic paper, and the six pieces here are the results of a similarly random but somewhat less accidental process. Exposing sheets of color-sensitive paper—most about eight feet long—to magenta, cyan, and yellow filters, Beshty produces overlapping patterns that suggest shattered panes of stained glass. The fiesta colors are acidic, both celebratory and jolting. A group of lifeless black-and-white portraits of people engaged in the making, promotion, and



consumption of these images is, not surprisingly, utterly eclipsed. Through April 4. (Wallspace, 619 W. 27th St. 212-594-9478.)

YOSHITOMO NARA

The Japanese doter on big-eyed, nasty little girls—victims, vixens, and the occasional vampire—varies his usual flat, cartoonish manner to layered and sumptuous painterly effect. As well, he introduces spectacularly carpentered sculpture. One slender, conical-roofed, fairy-tale hut, more than twenty-four feet high, is littered with stuffed toys. Another, partly ruined, appears to be the studio of a child-sized Nara, who has stepped out, leaving a CD player that emits saccharine songs. But the artist's enthusiastically unwholesome obsession grinds on. By now, his terrible tykes must number in the many thousands. Through March 28. (Boesky, 509 W. 24th St. 212-680-9889.)

TREVOR PAGLEN

Paglen's work is concerned with documenting U.S. government secret operations, most of which do not lend themselves to interesting or even particularly revealing photographs. But now that he's moved on from black-site prisons to surveillance and reconnaissance satellites, his pictures are often quite beautiful. Most of the long exposures here record the tracks of satellites in orbit as streaks or blips in the night sky and in deep space—familiar images that Paglen would have us see as ominous rather than awe-inspiring. If this is damning evidence of Big Brother at work, it doesn't look any more alarming than the pretty pictures in astronomy books—just another spin through a cosmic wonderland. Through April 4. (Bellwether, 134 Tenth Ave., at 18th St. 212-929-5959.)

DANA SCHUTZ

Imagine a two-fisted Raoul Dufy dispensing brawny prettiness. Young Schutz, from Michigan, makes tough, delicious paintings of social doings in which sketchy figures take form and fade amid welters of pattern, skittery line, and washed and splotched paint. Her colors, which run to pitch-perfect secondary hues, incessantly surprise. Schutz's assurance amazes. It's as if part of her were hell-bent on making messes, which another part punctiliously fluffs and plumps into easeful order. Don't miss a Declaration of Independence-signing tableau in which winsome Founding Fathers are chipped away to expose innards of monumental stone. Through April 25. (Feuer, 530 W. 24th St. 212-989-7700.)

"THE INTIMATE LINE"

Three photographers (Elinor Carucci, Sunil Gupta, and Angelika Sher) and a video artist (Amy Jenkins) look at childhood with empathy and concern. Carucci takes center stage with terrific color pictures of her very young children, which recall Sally Mann's early exploration of the pleasures and terrors of motherhood. The photographer, who appears as naked as her kids, nods to classic mother-and-child images only to undermine them with a tantrum and temperature, bruises, messes, kisses, and a playful moment of erotic exploration. Sher gathers her children and their friends in charmingly dishevelled tableaux and Jenkins zeroes in on her alternately nursing and dozing infant in a tender, mesmerizing video. Through May 2. (Sepia, 148 W. 24th St. 212-645-9444.)

Short List

DAN FLAVIN / CHRISTIAN HOLSTAD / DEREK JARMAN / MIKA TAJIMA: X, 548 W. 22nd St. 917-697-4886. Through May 29. **JASON FOX AND HUMA BHABHA:** Rosen, 525 W. 24th St. 212-627-6000. Through April 18. **MATT KEEGAN:** D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460. Through April 25. **ELLSWORTH KELLY:** Marks, 522 and 526 W. 22nd St.; 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200. Through April 11. **ANDREW LORD:** Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300. Through March 28. **MAREPE:** Kern, 532 W. 20th St. 212-367-9663. Opens March 26. **ADAM MCEWEN:** Klagsbrun, 520 W. 20th St. 212-243-3335. Through April 18. **RICHARD ALLEN MORRIS:** Peter Blum, 526 W. 29th St. 212-244-6055. Through May 9. **PICASSO:** Gagosian, 522 W. 21st St. 212-741-1717. Opens March 26. **ALYSON SHOTZ:** Eller, 615 W. 27th St. 212-206-6411. Through April 4.

MICKALENE THOMAS: Lehmann Maupin, 540 W. 26th St. 212-255-2932. Opens March 26.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

JON KESSLER

"Kessler's Circus" (Mocking Calder? Why?) jams many motorized gimcracks, which satirize American military disasters and atrocities, into a barracks tent, with live video feeds to stacked monitors. Ghastly things happen to soldier and victim dolls in spinning, spurting, and clickety-clack sequences. Other works include destroyed photographs, angrily ugly collages, and an animatronic old man, hirsute and armless, making deranged faces—a derelict veteran, probably. Any felt tension between the show's sprightly mechanics and its generic politics is less than taut. Kessler is a terrific bricoleur but no threat to Goya. He's fecklessly cruel. Through April 4. (Deitch Projects, 76 Grand St. 212-343-7300.)

Short List

LAURIE ANDERSON: Location One, 26 Greene St. 212-334-3347. Through May 2. **FIA BACKSTRÖM / MARIO GARCIA TORRES / STEPHEN KALTENBACH:** Hanley, 136 Watts St. 646-918-6824. Through April 18. **PAUL GRAHAM:** Salon 94 Freemans, 1 Freeman Alley. 646-672-9212. Through April 18. **SUZANNE MCCLELLAND:** Scott, 1 Rivington St. 212-358-8767. Through April 18. **BRUCE PEARSON:** Feldman, 31 Mercer St. 212-226-3232. Through April 18.

DANCE

SALLY SILVERS & DANCERS

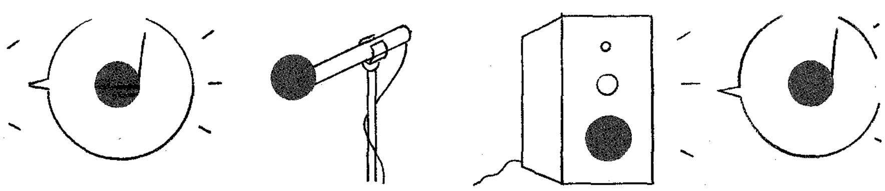
In "Yessified!," the downtown iconoclast tackles the slippery subject of racial identity her way, at a slant. In solos for herself, she toys with a "white dialect" poem, tanning reflectors, baby bottles of white and chocolate milk, and an absurdly tiny electric guitar. The episodic ensemble sections, accompanied by electronically processed twenties jazz and sixties soul, reference basketball, violin playing, and other racially charged activities. But most of Silvers's famous wit works tangentially: a small woman besting a big man, a little dancer emerging from between two large ones, and many more evanescent delights. "Think harder," someone yells, and everyone grimaces. (P.S. 122, First Ave. at 9th St. 212-352-3101. March 24-28 at 8 and March 29 at 6:30.)

MANDANCE PROJECT

For the choreographer Eliot Feld, play and illusion are an obsession. In Mandance's season at the Joyce, he has created a solo set to music by Laraaji and an ensemble piece using Ennio Morricone spaghetti-western tunes ("The Spaghetti Ballet"), both for the featured dancer Ha-Chi Yu, a former student from Feld's Ballet Tech school. Wu-Kang Chen gets two solos, one of which is a trancelike exploration of chiaroscuro. On April 1-2, Chen's Taiwan-based company, Horse, will perform its own evening-length work, "Bones." (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Mandance: March 25-28 at 8, March 29 at 2 and 7:30, and March 31 at 7:30. Through April 5.)

"JUILLIARD DANCES REPERTORY"

This year, a new crop of talented young performers from the Juilliard Dance program comes with a bonus: a live orchestra and chorus (also from the conservatory), to accompany Mark Morris's fabulously joyful "Gloria," guaranteed to lift any heart. Twyla Tharp's piece "The Fugue" is an artifact from her more postmodern days (the early seventies). Lar Lubovitch will be represented by an early piece, "North Star" (set to a Philip Glass score), while Ohad Naharin has composed an assemblage of excerpts from "Max" and "Three." (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, 155 W. 65th St. 212-721-6500. March 25-28 at 8 and March 29 at 3.)



LAURENT CILLUFO

JAZZ NOTES
MORE SATCHMO

After virtually inventing the lexicon for jazz soloists with his epochal Hot Five and Hot Seven recordings, Louis Armstrong set up shop at Decca Records in the mid-thirties. The Armstrong Deccas have not fared as well as their forebears, having been knocked about on compilations of dubious legality and dogged by various aspersions—mainly, that Armstrong had become a puppet for his manager Joe Glaser, who had turned Armstrong into a happy-go-lucky song-and-dance man ready to ham it up on cue.

But as **"The Complete Louis Armstrong Decca Sessions, 1935-1946"** (Mosaic Records) attests, Armstrong wasn't one to be intimidated by his past. The corking take on "Struttin' with Some Barbecue" makes the Okeh version seem positively weak-kneed, with Armstrong's big band ripping through the breaks. Armstrong the vocalist is arguably at his apex here, and it was through his vocalizations that Armstrong's chamber jazz took on a second life as pure pop manna. "On the Sunny Side of the Street" is a glorious hybrid: a mix of Stephen Foster-esque Americana and unprecedented vocal inflections that must have pricked up the ears of Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan. The Decca sessions even venture into hardcore R. & B. terrain, once the drummer "Big" Sid Catlett turns up. A fleeting discographical presence over his career, Catlett was at his best with Armstrong, his offbeat accents on "Baby Won't You Please Come Home" presaging soul's infatuation with syncopation.

As a trumpet player, there was no one to touch Armstrong, but Bing Crosby was an apt vocal foil. The two had their summit meeting in 1960, resulting in **"Bing and Satchmo"** (DRG Records), previously unavailable on compact disk. "Dardanella" suggests how keenly these men must have listened to each other: Crosby's sly syllabic upticks at the end of each line show how readily he had absorbed Armstrong's methodology, while Armstrong's vocal is a blend of full-on melody and smart, conversational tones, a Crosby staple. Throughout, Billy May's arrangements have plenty of starch to them, but "Lazy River" borders on a kind of laconic grace, two voices whiling the day away before drifting home.

—Colin Fleming

SUSAN MARSHALL & COMPANY
Each month since last September, the imagistic choreographer has released a one-minute film designed to be viewed on a small-screened device with Internet access. (All seven films, quick-witted, beautiful, and disturbing, can be accessed at www.peakperfs.org/framedances.) Marshall returns to the stage with "Adamantine," a work that plays with—and incorporates—the usually hidden parts of the venue, such as pipes and ropes and lighting equipment. (Alexander Kasser, Montclair State University, Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. March 26-27 at 7:30, March 28 at 8, and March 29 at 3.)

KEELY GARFIELD DANCE
Garfield's dances are vivid dreams, easy to read but difficult to interpret. In response to the found objects and the dark and strange goings-on, you might laugh or wake up screaming. In her current trilogy, "Limerence" tunnels into the longing for love, "Eva Potranspiration/Cloud 9" exposes family politics (including those of Garfield's boyfriend, Brandin Steffensen, and her eight-year-old daughter, Vivian Ra), and "First Attempt" tries, cryptically, to save the planet. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. March 26-28 at 8:30.)

LA FAMIGLIA DIMITRI
The New Victory presents a troupe of Italo-Swiss circus artists, members of a single family headed by Papa Dimitri, a mime and clown who studied with Étienne Decroux (Marcel Marceau's teacher) and later performed with Marceau. One of his daughters specializes in the slack wire, another in Latin-American folk music, and a son walks the tightrope. The show is folksy and intimate, the antithesis of flashier illusionist outfits like Cirque du Soleil. (209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. March 27 at 7, March 28 at 2 and 7, and March 29 at noon and 5. Through April 19.)

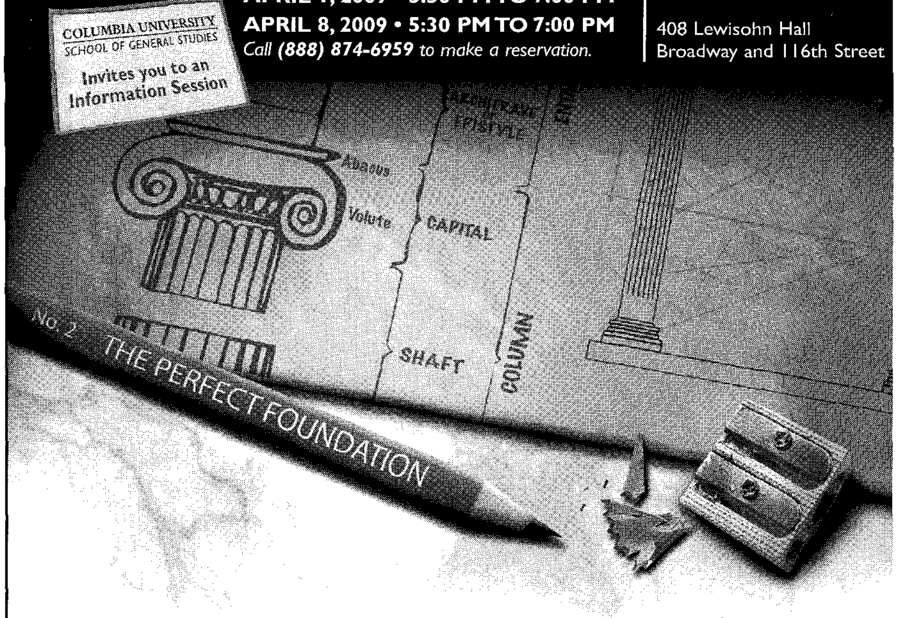
NEW CHAMBER BALLET
Miro Magloire and his five dancers—plus two company musicians and a guest violinist—return to City Center Studio 4 for another intimate soirée. The setting—a bare studio with bright lighting—and the sophisticated musical selections make for a bracing and focussed experience. The company will perform "Aeolia," a trio by Magloire set to Telemann; "Monologue," a piece set to music by Morton Feldman that features the delicate and pensive Elizabeth Brown; a new work by Magloire set to Webern pieces; and a new duet by the more expressionistic Deborah Lohse, a guest choreographer. (130 W. 56th St. 212-868-4444. March 27-28 at 8.)

YACUB ADDY'S ODADAA!
In the hands of this venerable ensemble, led by the drum master Yacub Addy, the traditional music of Ghana is, for all its polyrhythmic percussion, quite gentle. So is the dancing that goes with it: pelvic thrusts and hip swivels, jumps, flirtations, humor. Instead of the high-intensity barrage that one might expect from an African troupe, Odadaa! offers something subtler. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-545-7536. March 28 at 8.)

"SHIM SHAM"
Forget what the blind judges on NBC's "Superstars of Dance" recently said: Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards—gorgeous by every measure—is possibly the finest tap dancer working. Her turn hosting the Kitchen's open jam session should be something special. The capable Theo Hill and his trio provide live accompaniment. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11. March 30 at 8.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
The Otto Schenk production of "Der Ring des Nibelungen"—the signature effort of the James Levine era at the Met—has its last go-round this spring, to be replaced by a new Robert Lepage production beginning in 2010. We begin, naturally, with **"Das Rheingold."** James Morris, reprising once more the role of Wotan (which he created for this production), heads a strong ensemble cast that features Yvonne Naef, Jill Grove, and Richard Paul Fink; Levine himself is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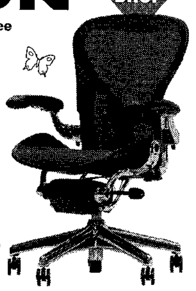
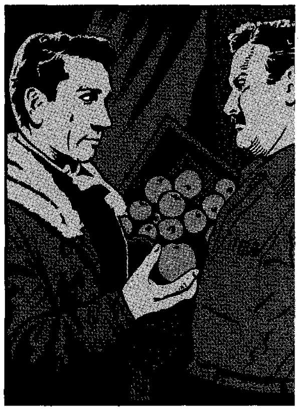


CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SEEDY AND TART

There's tough, and then there's "Thieves' Highway." The director is Jules Dassin and the screenplay is by A. I. Bezzerides, who dished up the kind of speeches you could cut your mouth on. "Touch my truck, and I'll climb into your hair."



MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

"Your end of nothing is nothing." "You look like chipped glass." That polite compliment is paid by Nick Garcos (Richard Conte) to Rica (Valentina Cortese), who picks him up at a waterfront lunch counter in San Francisco, takes him to her place, and plays tic-tac-toe on his bare chest with her fingernails. The film, made in 1949, screens at Film Forum on March 29th: the perfect comeback time, for those who need further proof of what the unfettered market—in this case, a fruit market—can do to the morals of men. The trick, in Dassin's slate-gray world, is to screw thy neighbor before he screws thee, and the movie's juiciest joke is a plot that turns on the price of Golden Delicious. The resident Satan is Lee J. Cobb, and the result is the most doom-laden apple story since Genesis, Chapter Three.

—*Anthony Lane*

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in the pit. (March 25 at 8 and March 28 at 1.) ♦ Before the magnificent Wagner soprano Waltraud Meier begins her excursion into the "Ring" cycle in April, she will do a turn as Santuzza in a revival of the reverent Franco Zeffirelli production of Mascagni's **"Cavalleria Rusticana,"** paired with its inevitable companion in verismo, Leoncavallo's **"Pagliacci."** Roberto Alagna and Charles Taylor join Meier in the first opera, with Nuccia Focile, Alberto Mastromarino, and Christopher Maltman joining Alagna in the second; Pietro Rizzo. (March 26 at 8.) ♦ A new cast comes in, with José Cura anchoring the two operas' tenor leads; Taylor and Ildikó Komlósi share the stage with him in **"Cavalleria"** and Vasili Ladyuk replaces Maltman in **"Pagliacci."** (March 30 at 8.) ♦ Urged on by her leading lady, Natalie Dessay, Mary Zimmerman, the daring director who turned "Lucia di Lammermoor" on its head last season, has given Bellini's **"La Sonnambula,"** a frail but dreamy bel-canto masterpiece, a lighthearted contemporary treatment. Dessay and Juan Diego Flórez manage Bellini's coloratura with winning charm; Evelino Pidò draws sinuous lines and softly deferential timbres from the Met orchestra. (March 28 at 8.) ♦ Rolando Villazón, active in opera once more, is scheduled to sing Nemorino in a revival of **"L'Elisir d'Amore"** in which he will be joined by such singers as Angela Gheorghiu (in the role of Adina), Franco Vassallo, and Simone Alaimo; Maurizio Benini. (March 31 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

THE WOOSTER GROUP: "LA DIDONE"
The company's new production of Francesco Cavalli's masterpiece of Venetian opera, acclaimed at the Edinburgh Festival, comes to St. Ann's Warehouse. The composer's very serious treatment of the ancient story of Dido and Aeneas will receive a radical rethink from the director Elizabeth LeCompte, whose production includes visual elements from the film "Terrore nello Spazio" (1965) by the Italian sci-fi/sex auteur Mario Bava. Hai-Ting Chinn and John Young sing the leading roles; the music director, Bruce Odland, has arranged Cavalli's early-Baroque score for an ensemble featuring both a lute and an electric guitar. (38 Water St., Dumbo, Brooklyn. March 25, March 27-28, and March 31 at 8 and March 29 at 7. 718-254-8779. Through April 26.)

LES ARTS FLORISSANTS
William Christie's academy for young singers, Le Jardin des Voix, goes on tour with a collection of semi-staged scenes from operas and oratorios by Monteverdi, Carissimi, Purcell, and Rameau. Vincent Boussard directs; Christie conducts his renowned period-instrument ensemble. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. March 28 at 8.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Nicholas McGegan, a jovial but expert presence in the Baroque community, leads the Philharmonic in an adventure in the music of Handel. The lissome soprano Christine Schäfer is on hand to sing arias from "Partenope," "Giulio Cesare," and "Alcina" in a program that also includes the Concerto Grosso in C Major ("Alexander's Feast") and the "Music for the Royal Fireworks." (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. March 26 at 7:30 and March 27-28 at 8.)

"MUSIC IN DESPERATE TIMES"
Amidst the horror of the Birkenau concentration camp, the violinist Alma Rosé (a niece of Gustav Mahler) somehow kept the members of her women's orchestra alive as the Nazi regime crumbled around them. The dedicated choral society Ars Choralis, in music (by Chopin, Schumann, and Mendelssohn) and testimony, performs a tribute to them in a concert at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. (Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 866-811-4111. March 28 at 8.)

LONDON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA: "RUSSIAN DREAMS"
The music of Sergei Prokofiev gets a big boost from Valery Gergiev, who will conduct all of the composer's symphonies over a four-concert cycle this month. March 29 at 3: The young virtuoso Alexei Volodin performs the composer's rarely heard Piano Concerto No. 4 (For the Left Hand), a commission from Paul Wittgenstein, in a concert also featuring the Symphonies Nos. 3 and 4 (revised version). ♦ March 30 at 8: In the final concert, Vadim Repin returns to take the spotlight in the Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, a rendition bookended by performances of the original version of the Fourth Symphony and of the majestic Symphony No. 5 in B-Flat Major. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500.)

MATA FESTIVAL
Once a glimmer in Philip Glass's gimlet eye, the festival, now in its second decade, has become a bright showcase for talented young composers. The Knights, Brooklyn's winning and versatile young chamber orchestra, opens the series at (Le) Poisson Rouge with performances of works by, among others, Andrew Hamilton (from Ireland, one of four MATA commissionees this year), Sarah Snider, and Justin Messina. (158 Bleecker St. lepoissonrouge.com. March 31 at 7.)

RECITALS

GUARNERI AND JOHANNES STRING QUARTETS
In a concert hosted by the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, the Guarneri—in its last Lincoln Center appearance—will pass the baton to the Johannes, one of the most talented of today's young ensembles. The program is enticing: New York premières of quartets by Esa-Pekka Salonen and Derek Bermel, as well as the Octets for Strings by William Bolcom (a commission) and, of course, Mendelssohn. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. March 25 at 7:30.)

ALEXEI VOLODIN
The young pianist, who will receive considerable exposure this week by soloing with the London Symphony Orchestra, also offers a recital at the Metropolitan Museum that features Bach's Partita No. 6 in E Minor, Rachmaninoff's "Corelli Variations," and Stravinsky's "Three Movements from 'Petrushka.'" (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. March 26 at 8.)

CHRISTOPHER O'RILEY
The American pianist, making a stir with his transcriptions of finer pop pieces, begins a three-concert series at Miller Theatre with a solo recital of music by Shostakovich and the band Radiohead; Stephen Byram and Jonathon Rosen mix a live video accompaniment as the music plays. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 27 at 8.)

IAN BOSTRIDGE AND JULIUS DRAKE
Bostridge's intellectual interests, and his forays into unusual repertory, keep his take on the classics fresh. His recital with the formidable pianist is all-Schubert, including such gems as "Die Forelle" and "Im Frühling." (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 28 at 8.)

THE NASH ENSEMBLE
One of London's finest chamber groups, favorites at the 92nd Street Y, cross the pond to perform an eclectic program featuring music by Mozart (the "Kegelstatt" Trio), Vaughan Williams, Stravinsky (the Suite from "Histoire du Soldat"), and Dvořák (the Piano Quartet in E-Flat Major). (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 28 at 8.)

AN DIE MUSIK
Friendly expertise matched with expressive intensity is the hallmark of this longtime ensemble, which returns to Merkin Concert Hall to offer a concert of works by Mozart (the Piano Quartet in G Minor), Schubert (the String Quintet), and John Corigliano ("Étude Fantasy," with the pianist Jade Simmons). (129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 29 at 4.)

SOILE ISOKOSKI
The Finnish soprano, a singer of aristocratic poise, comes to Zankel Hall to offer songs by Grieg, Brahms, Britten ("On This Island"), and Strauss. (212-247-7800. March 31 at 7:30.)

MURRAY PERAHIA
The magisterial pianist, not often heard in his native city, comes to Avery Fisher Hall to perform

masterworks by Bach, Mozart, Beethoven (the Sonata No. 23, "Appassionata"), and Brahms (the "Handel Variations"). (212-721-6500. March 31 at 8.)

EMANUEL AX, ITZHAK PERLMAN, AND YO-YO MA
Three great musicians (and good friends) offer a tribute to Mendelssohn: performances of his Piano Trios Nos. 1 and 2, along with a bouquet of the "Songs Without Words." (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 31 at 8.)

MOVIES OPENING

AMERICAN SWING
A documentary, directed by Jon Hart and Mathew Kaufman, about Plato's Retreat, a nineteen-seventies and eighties Manhattan sex club. Opening March 27. (Quad Cinema.)

THE COUNTRY TEACHER
In this drama, directed by Bohdan Sláma, a woman falls in love with a closeted gay teacher who is attracted to her teen-age son. In Czech. Opening March 27. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas and Quad Cinema.)

GOODBYE SOLO
Ramin Bahrani directed this drama, about a Senegalese cab driver in Winston-Salem and his relationship with an elderly passenger. Opening March 27. (Angelika Film Center.)

GUEST OF CINDY SHERMAN
A documentary about the video artist Paul H-O and his relationship with Sherman, directed by Paul H-O and Tom Donahue. Opening March 27. (Cinema Village.)

THE HAUNTING IN CONNECTICUT
A horror film, directed by Peter Cornwell, about a family whose new house, a former mortuary, is the site of supernatural happenings. Opening March 27. (In wide release.)

MONSTERS VS. ALIENS
An animated comedy about a girl who helps save the world from extraterrestrial invaders. Directed by Conrad Vernon and Rob Letterman; with the voices of Reese Witherspoon and Seth Rogen. Opening March 27. (In wide release.)

THE PERFECT SLEEP
A thriller, directed by Jeremy Alter, about a reformed hit man (Anton Pardoe) who returns to violence to rescue the woman he loves (Roselyn Sanchez). Opening March 27. (Quad Cinema.)

SHALL WE KISS?
A comedy, directed by and co-starring Emmanuel Mouret, about the unintended consequences of a casual affair. Opening March 27. (In limited release.)

12 ROUNDS
A thriller, directed by Renny Harlin, about a detective (John Cena) whose girlfriend (Ashley Scott) is kidnapped by a terrorist (Taylor Cole). Opening March 27. (In wide release.)

NOW PLAYING

ALEXANDER THE LAST
The latest film from the mumblecore (i.e., micro-budget) writer-director Joe Swanberg arrays the usual mumblecore obsession (romantic relationships among a small group of semi-articulate people) around a local theatre production. A married actress (Jess Weixler) contemplates an affair with a good-looking actor she's working with (Barlow Jacobs), only to discover that her sister (Amy Seimetz), with whom she's very close, is sleeping with him. In the past, Swanberg relied on a slapdash collage method of storytelling, with many relationships left hanging, to express a cool contempt for routine commercial filmmaking, but in this movie he's advancing toward a firmer structure and more emotionally explicit scenes. In its formal symmetries, the story suggests a stuttering version of one of Éric Rohmer's narratives of advance and retreat in "Six Moral Tales." Yet mumblecore's pleasures still lie in the sparks the actors strike in one another. Many of them suggested or added material to Swanberg's idea; the scenes are semi-improvised. With Justin Rice.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/16/09.) (IFC video on demand.)

THE CLASS
Extraordinary. François Bégaudeau, a teacher in a Parisian public school in the Twentieth Arrondissement, published a novel in 2006 chronicling a year in his classroom. Along with the director Laurent Cantet and the writer Robin Campillo, he then condensed and reshaped the material into a two-hour drama centering on the teacher (Bégaudeau, playing himself) and a small number of students (all played by actual students, though not the same ones he wrote about). Bégaudeau, who is in his thirties, is handsome, lean, and quick, with a strong voice; his slouching or rowdy fourteen-year-olds are mostly of African or Caribbean descent—still outsiders in France, and rightfully touchy about it. Some of them are resistant to education, which disrupts the pleasures of adolescence, and Bégaudeau aggressively comes after them, challenging, correcting, teasing, criticizing. The students are alive to him and come back hard, questioning French notions of discipline and manners. In all, "The Class" is a prime document of French post-colonial blues, though its relevance to American urban education could not be any greater if it had been shot in the Bronx or Trenton or South Los Angeles. In French.—*D.D.* (12/22 & 29/08) (In limited release.)

COOL HAND LUKE
Slick, crude, yet somehow a pop classic. Stuart Rosenberg's direction emphatically nails down every corner of the alienated-Christ allegory embedded in this 1967 Southern chain-gang saga, adapted by Frank R. Pierson and Donn Pearce from Pearce's novel. Rosenberg deserves credit for gathering some landmark performances, notably from Strother Martin as the quietly menacing, country-shrewd prison-camp captain who says, "What we've got here is failure to communicate," and, of course, from Paul Newman in the title role of the decorated Second World War veteran and peacetime ne'er-do-well who can't conform to save his life. Newman's contained charisma and paradoxical modesty are perfect for the role of a natural martyr rebel, and George Kennedy, in an Oscar-winning supporting turn, is an ideal foil as an effusive inmate leader. Conrad Hall did the atmospheric, sometimes zoom-happy cinematography, and the rest of the remarkable cast includes J. D. Cannon, Harry Dean Stanton, Dennis Hopper, and Joe Don Baker.—*Michael Sragow* (BAM; March 29.)

CORALINE
The spindly metal claw, like a tarantula made of steel, squeezes under a door and comes right at you; the hummingbirds hover before your face. The animated "Coraline," seen in its 3-D version, now and then uses the third dimension aggressively, for nose-biting or swooping effect, but most of the time, the writer-director Henry Selick, working with Neil Gaiman's novel, extends his reach into space as a way of increasing mobility and adventure—as a gift to imagination. There's a lot of barrelling through tunnels and dashing into rooms, and also some very startling effects, such as when the heroine, Coraline (voiced by Dakota Fanning), a spunky eleven-year-old girl, is walking with an all-knowing cat (Keith David) and both of them are under the control of a witch who suddenly, piece by piece, turns everything around them into white blankness. All dimensions, it seems, can be erased. Coraline longs for more attention than she's getting from her parents, so she enters a parallel world in which her parents are very attentive indeed—so attentive that they want to take control of her and sew buttons into her eyes and turn her into a ghost child. Scary and elegant.—*D.D.* (3/2/09) (In wide release.)

FOOLISH WIVES
In his third film, from 1922, the director Erich von Stroheim caustically applies his camera to the casinos of Monte Carlo and the luxury hotels and squalid back streets of Monaco to burn away illusions of civilized behavior and reveal the full force of their

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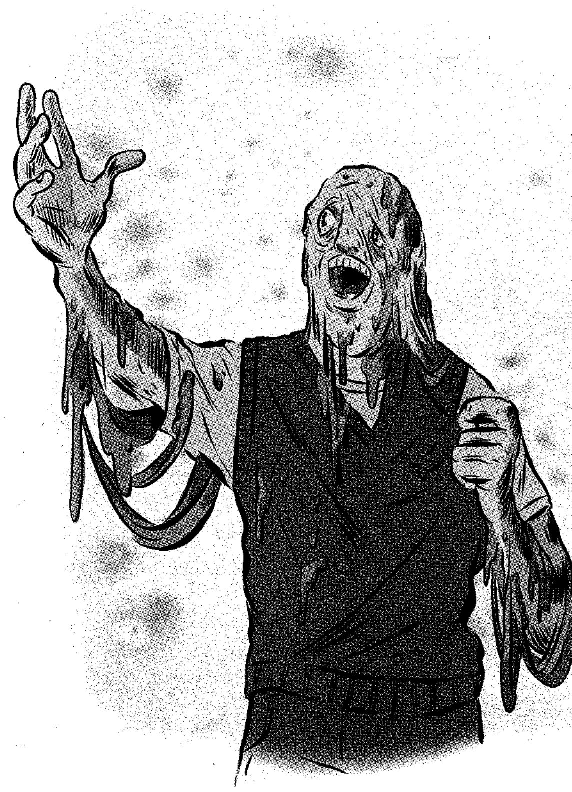
high-toned denizens' greed, cravenness, violence, lust, and downright villainy. Stroheim stars as Count Wladislaw Sergius Karamzin, a dubious Russian aristocrat in exile and suave but penniless seducer who, in high season, rents a palatial home with two ostensible *cousines* and plans to pay for it with his conquests' hush money. His chosen prey is the wife of the newly arrived American ambassador. Stroheim marshalls colossal (and colossally expensive) sets, an army of extras, and a cast of disturbingly plausible grotesques who display a wide spectrum of human failings, but the prime source of his teeming realism is visual: he bangs out angles that slice up the action, like a Cubist knife-thrower, and puts them together with a pre-Eisensteinian cunning. With its mad grandeur, seething bitterness, and vengeful unmasking, Stroheim's enterprise reflects his own vertiginous arc of experience, from fin-de-siècle Vienna and Ellis Island to the fleshpots of boomtown Hollywood. Silent.—*Richard Brody* (New-York Historical Society; March 29.)

GERTRUD

Moving at the gravely impassioned pace of a symphonic adagio, Carl Theodor Dreyer's last film, from 1964, is a paean to love—a subject it exalts with lyrical rapture and parses with philosophical precision. It opens with its title character (Nina Pens Rode), an opera singer of a certain age, telling her husband (Bendt Rothe), a renowned lawyer about to be named a cabinet minister, that she will leave him for a poor young composer. The story is the stuff of melodrama, but the controlled fury of Dreyer's method raises it to grand tragedy—most of all, in the homecoming of Gertrud's first lover (Ebbe Rode), a poet of sexual liberation, now fifty, fastidious, and nostalgic. Filming their reunion in a pair of stupendous, deeply moving long takes (one running nearly ten minutes), Dreyer transcends their pleasure and pain to capture the eternal anguish of time passing and death approaching. Explicitly set during Freud's heyday and referring to experiments with hypnosis and dreams, Dreyer's drama depicts a world in which repressed carnal desire is replaced by the inevitably frustrated spiritual desire that Gertrud expresses and embodies: the longing for a love so total and consuming that it contains the seeds of its own destruction. In Danish.—*R.B.* (BAM; March 26.)



"The Toxic Avenger," a musical, at New World Stages.

ZOHAR LAZAR

GOMORRAH

A hell of a film, if you can take the hell. Matteo Garrone's movie is adapted from a 2006 book, an inflamed investigation of organized crime in Naples, by the journalist Roberto Saviano. The screen version is no less shocking, but Garrone, unlike Saviano, keeps his cool—as he needs to, with five separate narratives to juggle. We get a pair of teenagers who dream of becoming sadistic big shots, although the camera catches something instantly pathetic in their delirium. (Watch them standing on a lonely beach in their underpants, firing stolen guns at nothing at all.) We get a kid who carries drugs for the Camorra, the Neapolitan Mafia, the innocence seeping from him with every favor. Then, there are three men who look as if they could be related (it must be deliberate casting). One is a tailor who moonlights as a teacher for Chinese immigrant workers; another hands out money in the Mob-ruled warrens of a northern suburb; the third dumps toxic waste into the sump of the countryside. These are finely gauged performances (Salvatore Cantalupo's heartbreaking one, as the tailor, being the standout), but Garrone went one better by recruiting locals into the minor roles, and the whole project has a dangerously authentic smell. Yet the movie stirs beyond documentary, ending up as a controlled rumination on the cruelty of fate; most of the characters are as flies to wanton boys, and they don't come more wanton than the Camorra. In Italian (or, rather, Neapolitan).—*Anthony Lane* (2/23/09) (In limited release.)

THE GREAT BUCK HOWARD

A strange, stodgy throwback of a picture—reflecting, perhaps, its principal character, who is a throwback himself. For years, Buck Howard (John Malkovich) has worked as a stage mentalist, crossing the country and reading the minds of its citizens. He used to be a regular on the "Tonight Show," with Johnny Carson, but that was ages ago; now he plays to older audiences in smaller towns. He takes on a new assistant, in the shape of Troy (Colin Hanks)—a pleasant fellow, who keeps telling us (in a superfluous voice-over) how life-changing the experience has been, although he seems no less dull at the end of it than he did at the start. The director is Sean McGinly, who directs as if he himself were Troy, barely roused by the magic of the maestro. In more encouraging hands, Malkovich might have turned on the menace, but he seems only half-engaged by the tale, as does the rest of a surprisingly strong cast—Steve Zahn, Griffin Dunne, Ricky Jay, and Tom Hanks, who plays Troy's disapproving dad. The whole thing is shaken awake for a while by the earthy Emily Blunt, before drifting back to sleep.—*A.L.* (3/23/09) (In wide release.)

I LOVE YOU, MAN

No one would mistake the director John Hamburg for Ingmar Bergman, but his brittle, glossy comedy, despite its intermittently entertaining antics, leaves a long and bitter aftertaste of the haut-bourgeois blues. It's set in the now defunct milieu of the go-getting real-estate business and stars Paul Rudd as Peter Klaven, a hardworking young Los Angeles broker who is about to marry. His fiancée, Zooey Rice (Rashida Jones), has a tart-tongued posse of friends to dish with and fill out the wedding party, but Peter, for whom love and work are all, has none, and goes on a series of "man dates" to expand his purview. The buddy he ends up with, Sydney Fife (Jason Segel), an overgrown adolescent with mysterious resources and seemingly no inner life, pushes into Peter's world and creates problems for the couple. The humor is all verbal—there's little visual and physical invention—but it's clever and sometimes touching, as when Peter repeatedly stumbles over terms of male endearment. It runs on the old Mars-Venus dichotomy of emotional repression versus expression, but brings out a far stranger and more specific current of underlying discord, regarding the isolating comforts of prosperity, the fault lines of friendships, and the murky depths of what passes for love. With Jon Favreau, Jane Curtin, J. K. Simmons, and Lou Ferrigno as himself.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

SUNSHINE CLEANING

As any actor will tell you, goodness, of all the character traits, is one of the hardest to make interesting. The young Amy Adams, with her doll-like appearance—blue eyes, red hair, very pale skin—has what can only be called a gift for portraying generosity, optimism, and cheerfulness. She can make ingenuousness seem noble, by expressing a powerful will to find the best in life. In this Sundance-style independent movie, she plays an overburdened single mother living in Albuquerque. She looks after her kid, her scapegrace younger sister (Emily Blunt), and her affectionate but unsteady father (Alan Arkin), while carrying on a motel-room love affair with a married cop (Steve Zahn). Her school friends have married well, while she and her sister make a living entering shabby houses in which people have been murdered or committed suicide and then cleaning up the remnants of their lives. What draws them to this depressing line of work? That's the movie's mystery, which is only gradually revealed. The writer (Megan Holley) and the director (Christine Jeffs) might have gone further into danger and emotional loss; at times, "Sunshine Cleaning" borders on mere whimsy. But Adams, forging ahead gamely, keeps it aloft.—*D.D.* (Lincoln Square and Sunshine Cinema.)

TAKEN

Liam Neeson plays a divorced father and former C.I.A. employee, who lives in Los Angeles to be near his immensely annoying teen-age daughter (Maggie Grace). When she is kidnapped on a trip to Paris, he tracks her down, taking the opportunity to combine his two favorite cultural interests: tender paternal love and indiscriminate homicide. First, he slaughters the Albanians who stole her, before moving on to the Arabs who want to buy her, and you feel quite sure that he would, if required, slash and thump his way through the rest of the alphabet. For those with a taste for political allegory, there is something to ponder here, although the director, Pierre Morel, together with his producer (and co-writer) Luc Besson, takes things at such a clip that little room is left for contemplation. The result is unrelenting, improbable, and humorless; Neeson, as domineering as ever, shades his feats of aggression with a solemn gravity that they scarcely deserve, and anyone raised on "An American in Paris" will weep to think how far we have travelled from Gene Kelly. That was a fantasy of international ease; this is a bad dream of revenge.—*A.L.* (2/2/09) (In wide release.)

TOKYO SONATA

A tale of the times, in which a Japanese businessman (Teruyuki Kagawa) loses his job but finds himself unable to break the bad news to his family. We feel the pressure of things unspoken ripple through his family, wondering what his subservient wife (Kyoko Koizumi) already knows, and how long she will be able to preserve her decorum. As for his sons, the younger (Kai Inowaki) provokes chaos at school and takes piano lessons on the sly, as if they were a crime, while the elder (Yu Koyanagi) does the impossible and joins the American military—a clear case of the director, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, rigging the facts to suit his thematic needs. The story is awkwardly split, opening in tremulous peace and then exploding halfway through into a barrage of hectic incidents—a kidnapping, a theft, a car accident, and an unlikely epiphany by the sea. Kurosawa forgoes credibility, you might say, in favor of doom-mongering; even viewers who don't accept such a deal will be struck by the menacing calm of his compositions, and his unveiling of a life made from lies. In Japanese.—*A.L.* (3/23/09) (IFC Center and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

TWO LOVERS
If this really is the swan song of Joaquin Phoenix, as the actor has vowed, then it's a fine-looking swan to go out on. He plays Leonard, who lives in Brighton Beach with his parents, works in the family's dry-cleaning store, and seems not just troubled in mind but, as it were, only half-formed as an adult member of society. Not that this stops him from attracting the attention of beautiful women; first comes Sandra (Vinessa Shaw), the daughter of his parents' friends, followed shortly by Michelle (Gwyneth Paltrow), whose apartment overlooks his own, and who can boast a range of perplexities almost as broad as his, what with her weakness for drugs and her reliance on the wallet of a married man (Elias Koteas). James Gray's film observes Leonard as he seesaws between these two alliances; as late as the final scene, we cannot tell which way he will tip, still less whether his choice will make him happy ever after. The overall result is a cramped and distressing movie that is somehow eased and opened out by its rich soundtrack and, above all, by the grace of its compositions. With Isabella Rossellini as Leonard's long-suffering mother.—*A.L.* (2/23/09) (In limited release.)

WATCHMEN
The names of many directors, including Terry Gilliam and Paul Greengrass, have been linked with this project over the years. Only now will they realize what a lucky escape they had. The task was to find a way of dramatizing Alan Moore's graphic novel—something of a cult among devotees, which means that, like all cults, it has escaped critical rigor. The helm was finally handed to Zack Snyder, who made the loopy but entertaining "300"; this time, he has conjured a work that forgets to entertain but somehow manages to bore, bewilder, and disgust. We are introduced to a band of former crime busters, now under threat: Nite Owl (Patrick Wilson), the Comedian (Jeffrey Dean Morgan), Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup), the lithe but witless Silk Spectre (Malin Akerman), a moneyed fop named Ozymandias (Matthew Goode), and, lastly, Rorschach (Jackie Earle Haley), who takes time off from merciless slaughter to narrate the proceedings. None of them is striking enough to hold our attention for long; their powers, superpowers, toys, and disguises seem wide-ranging but indeterminate, and any hint of political satire—as intended by the angry Moore—is drowned in a flood of brutal murk. The result takes infinite adolescent pleasure in its own nastiness and gives no pleasure in return. With Carla Gugino, a fine actress who should have stayed away.—*A.L.* (3/9/09) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

FADOS: Lincoln Plaza Cinemas. **THE LAST HOUSE ON THE LEFT:** In wide release. **RACE TO WITCH MOUNTAIN:** In wide release.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5181)—The films of Hollis Frampton. March 25-March 31 at 6:45: "Hapax Legomena," parts 1-3, (1971-1973). ♦ March 25-March 31 at 9:15: "Hapax Legomena," parts 4-7 (1971-72). ♦ March 28 at 4:30: "A Lecture" (1968). ♦ March 29 at 4:30: "Zorns Lemma" (1970). ♦ Special screening. March 28 at 7: Short films by Elaine Summers, including "Walking Dance for Any Number" (1968).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-636-4100)—The films of Carl Theodor Dreyer. March 25 at 7: "The Parson's Widow" (1920; silent). ♦ March 26 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:30: "Gertrud" (†). ♦ March 30 at 7: "Love One Another" (1922; silent). ♦ March 31 at 6:50 and 9:15: "Vampyr" (1932; in German). ♦ The films of Paul Newman. March 27 at 2, 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Rachel, Rachel" (1968, Newman). ♦ March 28 at 4:30 and 9:15: "The Color of Money" (1986, Martin Scorsese). ♦ March 28 at 2 and 6:50: "The Mackintosh Man" (1973, John Huston). ♦ March 29 at 3, 6, and 9: "Cool Hand Luke" (†).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—In revival. March 25-26 at 2, 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "Z" (1969, Costa-Gavras; in French). ♦ The films of Jules Dassin. March 27-28 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:40, 7:50, and 9:50: "Night and the City" (1950). ♦ March 29 at 1:30, 5:10, and 9: "Thieves' Highway" (1949). ♦ March 29 at 3:20 and 7: "The Naked City" (1948). ♦ March 30 at 1:30, 5:30, and 9:30: "Nazi Agent" (1942). ♦ March 30 at 3:30 and 7:30: "Reunion in France" (1942). ♦ March 31 at 1:30, 3:35, 5:40, 7:45, and 9:50: "Up Tight" (1968).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—"New Directors/New Films." March 26 at 6:15: "Amreeka" (2009, Cherien Dabis; in English and Arabic). ♦ March 28 at 3:30: "Stay the Same Never Change" (2009, Laurel Nakadate). ♦ March 26 at 9: "Barking Water" (2009, Sterlin Harjo). ♦ March 27 at 6:15: "Every Little Step" (2008, James D. Stern and Adam Del Deo). ♦ March 27 at 9: "Treeless Mountain" (2008, So Yong Kim; in Korean). ♦ March 28 at 6: "Unmade Beds" (2008, Alexis Dos Santos). ♦ March 28 at 9: "Louise-Michel" (2008, Gustave de Kervern and Benoît Delépine; in French). ♦ March 29 at 2: "The Fly" (2008, Vladimir Kott; in Russian). ♦ March 29 at 5: "Cold Souls" (2008, Sophie Barthes). ♦ March 29 at 8: "The Maid" (2009, Sebastián Silva; in Spanish). ♦ March 31 at 6:15: "The Cove" (2009, Louie Psihoyos). ♦ March 31 at 9: "Paper Soldier" (2008, Alexey German, Jr.; in Russian).

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE
Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through March 31: The films of Jacques Doillon. March 31 at 12:30, 4, and 7:30: "Raja" (2003; in French).

IFC CENTER
323 Sixth Ave., at W. 3rd St. (212-924-7771)—"After the Revolution: Cuba on Screen." March 27-29 at 11 A.M.: "Cecilia" (1982, Humberto Solas; in Spanish). ♦ "Waverly Midnights." March 27-28: "Videodrome" (1983, David Cronenberg).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"New Directors/New Films." March 25 at 7: "Amreeka" (2009, Cherien Dabis; in English and Arabic). ♦ March 26 at 6:15: "Stay the Same Never Change" (2009, Laurel Nakadate). ♦ March 26 at 9: "The Fly" (2008, Vladimir Kott; in Russian). ♦ March 27 at 6:15: "The Maid" (2009, Sebastián Silva; in Spanish). ♦ March 27 at 9: "Cold Souls" (2008, Sophie Barthes). ♦ March 28 at 3: "Barking Water" (2009, Sterlin Harjo). ♦ March 28 at 6: "Paper Soldier" (2008, Alexey German, Jr.; in Russian). ♦ March 28 at 9: "The Cove" (2009, Louie Psihoyos). ♦ March 29 at 2: "Treeless Mountain" (2008, So Yong Kim; in Korean). ♦ March 29 at 4:30: "Every Little Step" (2008, James D. Stern and Adam Del Deo). ♦ March 29 at 7: "9.99" (2008, Tatia Rosenthal). ♦ March 30 at 6:15: "Louise-Michel" (2008, Gustave de Kervern and Benoît Delépine; in French). ♦ March 30 at 9: "Unmade Beds" (2008, Alexis Dos Santos).

NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY
170 Central Park W., at 77th St. (212-712-7237)—"The Silent Clowns Film Series." March 29 at 2: "Foolish Wives" (†).

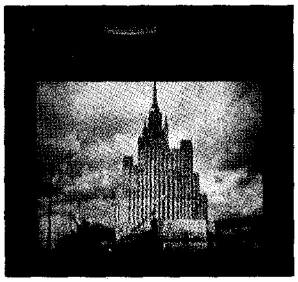
RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—"Cabaret Cinema." March 27 at 9:30: "Gimme Shelter" (1970, Albert and David Maysles).

READINGS AND TALKS

BOWERY POETRY CLUB
Mark O'Donnell, the co-author of the musical "Hairspray," the poet George Franklin, the memoirist Kaylie Jones, the fiction writers Susan Ruel and Keith Hendershot, and others read from their contributions to the new issue of the literary magazine *Epiphany*. (308 Bowery, March 25 at 6. Tickets at the door.)

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
SECOND LIFE

In 1987, when West Chelsea was the fiefdom of taxi mechanics and after-hours-club doormen, Dia Center for the Arts opened on West Twenty-second Street. The avant-garde museum—mecca, oasis, town hall—closed in 2004, less than a year after the mastodonic Dia:Beacon made its début. This month, the space was reopened, and rechristened X. Forgive the portentous name; the yearlong, nonprofit project is just the ticket for uncertain times. Admission is free. There are weekly events (March 26: the Princeton art historian Hal Foster and Yale's David Joselit discuss "recessional aesthetics") and, of course, shows, curated by Cecilia Alemani. Derek Jarman's short films, on three floors, and Christian Holstad's rooftop bunker share a fevered intensity. Mika Tajima's hybrid stage set, film studio, and storage unit is the dull, if colorful cousin of Jorge Pardo's tiles, installed in the same spot (and mod palette), in 2000. Nostalgic for industrial-strength art? Skip the elevator. The Dia Art Foundation has loaned X Dan Flavin's last light sculpture, a site-specific piece from 1996, which fills the stairwell with the matter-of-fact beauty of its blue-and-green glow.
—*Andrea K. Scott*



DEREK JARMAN, "EARLY FILMS"/COURTESY X INITIATIVE AND JAMES MACKAY

"PUBLIC ART FUND TALKS"

The sculptor Rachel Harrison discusses her work. (New School, 66 W. 12th St. March 25 at 6:30. For more information, visit www.publicartfund.org.)

192 BOOKS

Felix Rohatyn talks about his new book, "Bold Endeavors: How Our Government Built America, and Why It Must Rebuild Now." (192 Tenth Ave., between 21st and 22nd Sts. For reservations, which are required, call 212-255-4022. March 26 at 6:30.)

BOOKCOURT

The journalist Robert Sullivan celebrates the publication of his latest book, "The Thoreau You Don't Know: What the Prophet of Environmentalism Really Meant," with a reading and a bit of traditional Irish music from the Washington Square Harp and Shamrock Orchestra, which is led by the ethnomusicologist, musician, and noted raconteur Mick Moloney. (163 Court St., Brooklyn. No tickets necessary. March 26 at 7.)

"DIRTY LAUNDRY: LOADS OF PROSE"

The ongoing reading series in a working laundromat (the presenters offer attendees quarters for the machines and detergent, should they care to multitask during the event) presents a night of stories about Gotham, with Gregory Beyer, Caroline H. Dworin, and Saki Knafo, all of whom are regular contributors to the *Times*'s City section. (Avenue A Laundromat, 97 Avenue A, between 6th and 7th Sts. No tickets necessary. March 26 at 8.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

CIRCUS TIME

UniverSoul Circus, the only African-American-owned and -operated circus in the United States, puts a hip-hop spin on a timeless tradition. The party gets started under its big top in Roy Wilkins Park, in Queens, on March 25, and continues throughout the five boroughs through May 3. (For more information, visit www.universoulcircus.com.) ♦ Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, a.k.a. the Greatest Show on Earth, rolls into Madison Square Garden, complete with elephants, clowns, and acrobats, starting March 26. (800-745-3000. Through April 13.)

THE GROLIER CLUB

America's oldest and largest society for bibliophiles has mounted an exhibition honoring the five-hundredth anniversary of the accession to the throne of Henry VIII, the serial monogamist, shaker of faiths, and literary inspiration. The show includes books from Henry's library, letters (including one from Catherine of Aragon complaining about her divorce proceedings), and the first sanctioned Bible in English. A series of lectures are planned, including one about the King on March 26 at 6 by James Carley, the author of "The Books of King Henry VIII and His Wives." (47 E. 60th St. 212-838-6690. Through May 2.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

Photograph collectors will have much to keep them occupied this week and next, beginning with the annual **AIPAD Photography Show**, presented by the Association of International Photography Art Dealers (March 26-29) at the Park Avenue Armory. Seventy-odd traders will show their stuff, ranging from photographs from the nineteenth century (including an albumen print of a natty cavalry corporal from the U.S. Army, circa 1863, offered by Charles Isaacs Photographs), to modernist works, fashion shots, and an image that was recently featured in these pages, a portrait, by Mariana Cook, of Barack and Michelle Obama in their Chicago home back in 1996 (offered by Lee Marks Fine Art). (Park Ave. at 67th St. 202-367-1158.) ♦ After a sale of twentieth-century design objects (March 27), **Sotheby's** presents its own offering of photographs (March 30). One of the top lots, "The Coral Sea," is a haunting and somewhat atypical image by Mapplethorpe, a platinum print in smoky grays of the eponymous aircraft carrier beneath a dense, velvety sky, looking almost like a ghost ship. Another print, a daguerreotype from the mid-nineteenth century, reveals a New York unknown to contemporary denizens, from a time when upper Broadway was still the sticks. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) ♦ At **Christie's** as well, twentieth-century design—including works by Tiffany, Jean Prouvé, Nakashima, and Frank Gehry, on March 26—is followed by a sale of photographs (March 31), starting off with twenty lots left over from the collection of Leon Constantiner, all by the master of Valkyrian excess, Helmut Newton. Then, along with works by Irving Penn, Avedon, and Cartier-Bresson, the house will auction off a portrait by the fashion photographer Adolph de Meyer (from Avedon's private collection) of the glamorous and eccentric Marchesa Luisa Casati, who was known to wear live snakes as part of her parure, became the lover of D'Annunzio, and entertained such guests as Isadora Duncan, Nijinsky, and Bakst at her decadent soirées in Venice, Paris, and Rome. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

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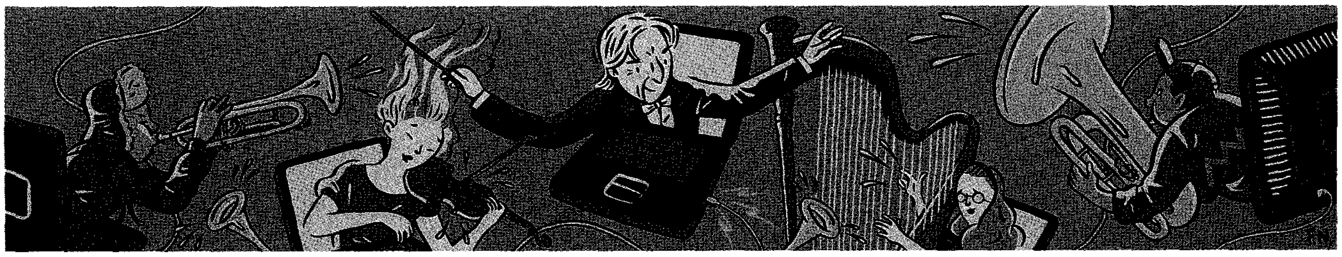
Visit the Goings On blog, at www.newyorker.com/go/goingson, for additional cultural coverage and commentary.



FIDO NESTI

ON THE HORIZON

THE THEATRE
YES, LET'S GO

April 3

Bill Irwin played Lucky in the famed 1988 production of Beckett's "Waiting for Godot." Now, he returns as Vladimir to Nathan Lane's Estragon, at Studio 54. John Glover takes up Irwin's old role—replacing David Strathairn, who dropped out of the show last month—and John Goodman rounds out the cast as Pozzo. Anthony Page directs for the Roundabout Theatre Company. (212-719-1300.)

ART
YOUTH VALUE

April 8-June 14

Fifty artists from twenty-five countries—all born after 1976—will exhibit some one hundred and fifty works in the New Museum's much anticipated inaugural triennial, "Younger Than Jesus." (212-219-1222.)

MOVIES
INDIA SONG

April 15-30

Satyajit Ray, who assisted Jean Renoir on "The River," was, for nearly forty years, India's crucial cinematic master. The Film Society of Lincoln Center's retrospective concentrates on his early career, including the classic Apu trilogy and such rarities as "Three Daughters," based on stories by Rabindranath Tagore, as well as his bio-pic of Tagore. (212-875-5610.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC
PRACTICE, PRACTICE

April 15

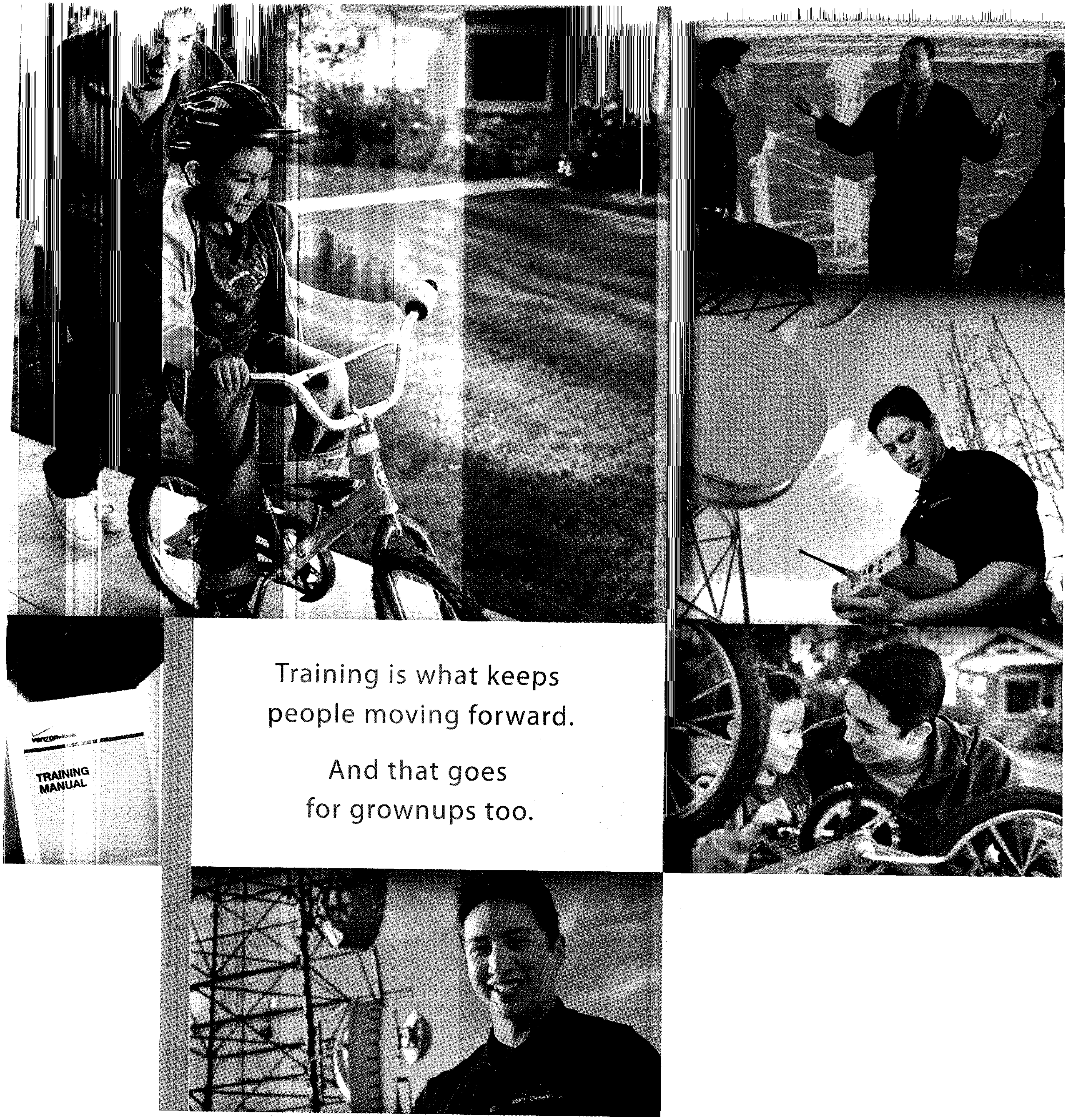
There is now a new way to get to Carnegie Hall. The YouTube Symphony Orchestra, a group of ninety-six instrumentalists from thirty countries selected via online auditions, will make its début in a concert conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas. (212-247-7800.)

READINGS AND TALKS
NO SMALL THING

April 15

The high-wire artist Philippe Petit, who famously walked between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center thirty-five years ago this summer, talks about his adventures, following a screening of the documentary "Man on Wire," at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. (866-811-4111.)

The YouTube Symphony Orchestra, at Carnegie Hall.



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THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
ECONOMY VS. ENVIRONMENT

The week before last, twenty-five hundred delegates, from more than seventy countries, met in Copenhagen to prepare for the United Nations Climate Change Conference, which will take place there in December and will produce a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, which was adopted in 1992 and will expire in 2012. The speakers in Copenhagen were united by a sense of urgency—and for good reason, given the poor record of most participating countries in meeting their Kyoto targets for reducing the emission of greenhouse gases.

So far, the most effective way for a Kyoto signatory to cut its carbon output has been to suffer a well-timed industrial implosion, as Russia did after the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1991. The Kyoto benchmark year is 1990, when the smokestacks of the Soviet military-industrial complex were still blackening the skies, so when Vladimir Putin ratified the protocol, in 2004, Russia was already certain to meet its goal for 2012. The countries with the best emissions-reduction records—Ukraine, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic—were all parts of the Soviet empire and therefore look good for the same reason.

The United States didn't ratify the Kyoto Protocol, but Canada did, and its experience is suggestive because its economy and per-capita oil consumption are similar to ours. Its Kyoto target is a six-per-cent reduction from 1990 levels. By 2006, however, despite the expenditure of billions of dollars on climate initiatives, its greenhouse-gas output had increased to a hundred and twenty-two per cent of the goal, and the environment minister described the Kyoto target as "impossible."

The explanation for Canada's difficulties isn't complicated: the world's principal source of man-made greenhouse gases has always been prosperity.

The recession makes that relationship easy to see: shuttered factories don't spew carbon dioxide; the unemployed drive fewer miles and turn down their furnaces, air-conditioners, and swimming-pool heaters; struggling corporations and families cut back on air travel; even affluent people buy less throwaway junk. Gasoline consumption in the United States fell almost six per cent in 2008. That was the result not of a sudden greening of the American consciousness but of the rapid rise in the price of oil during the first half of the year, followed by the full efflorescence of the current economic mess.

The world's financial and energy crises are connected, and they are similar because credit and fossil fuels are forms of leverage: oil, coal, and natural gas are multipliers of labor in much the same way that credit is a multiplier of wealth. Human history is the history of our ascent up what the naturalist Loren Eiseley called "the heat ladder": coal bested firewood as an amplifier of productivity, and oil and natural gas bested coal. Fossil fuels have enabled us to leverage the strength of our bodies, and we are borrowing against the world's dwindling store of inexpensive energy in the same way that we borrowed against the illusory equity in our homes. Moreover, American dependence on fossil fuels isn't going to end any time soon: solar panels and wind turbines provided only about a half per cent of total U.S. energy consumption in 2007, and they don't work when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

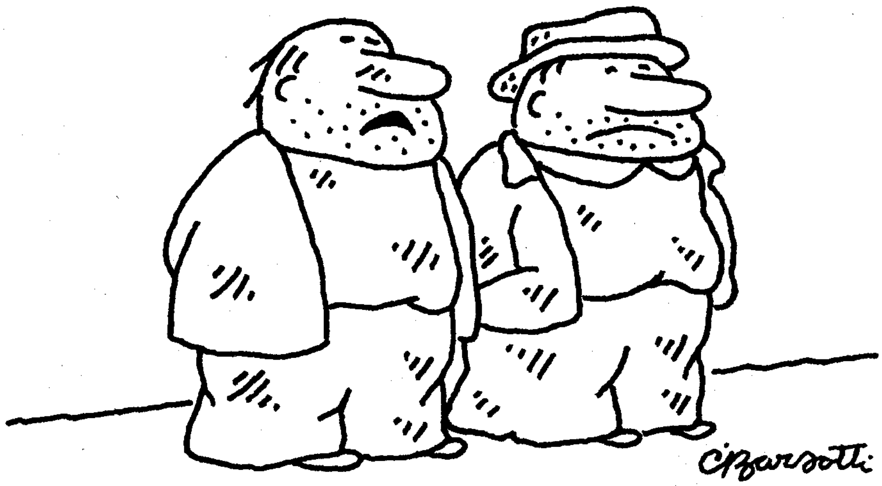
blowing. Replacing oil is going to require more than determination.

The environmental benefits of economic decline, though real, are fragile, because they are vulnerable to intervention by governments, which, understandably, want to put people back to work and get them buying non-necessities again—through programs intended to revive ordinary consumer spending (which has a big carbon footprint), and through public-investment projects to build new roads and airports (ditto). Our best intentions regarding conservation and carbon reduction inevitably run up against the realities of foreclosure and bankruptcy and unemployment. How do we persuade people to drive less—an environmental necessity—while also encouraging them to revive our staggering economy by buying new cars?

The popular answer—switch to hybrids—leaves the fundamental problem unaddressed. Increasing the fuel efficiency of a car is mathematically indistinguishable from lowering the price of its fuel; it's just fiddling with the other side of the equation. If doubling the cost of gas gives drivers an environmentally valuable incentive to drive less—the recent oil-price spike pushed down consumption and vehicle miles travelled, stimulated investment in renewable energy, increased public transit ridership, and killed the Hummer—then doubling the efficiency of cars makes that incentive disappear. Getting more miles to the gallon is of no benefit to the environment if it leads to an increase in driving—and the response of drivers to decreases in the cost of driving is to drive more. Increases in fuel efficiency could be bad for the environment unless they're accompanied by powerful disincentives that force drivers to find alternatives to hundred-mile commutes. And a national carbon policy, if it's to have a real impact, will almost certainly need to bring American fuel prices back to at least where they were at their peak in the summer of 2008. Electric cars are not the panacea they are sometimes claimed to be, not only because the electricity they run on has to be generated somewhere but also because making driving less expensive does nothing to discourage people from sprawling across the face of the planet, promoting forms of development that are inherently and catastrophically wasteful.

One beneficial consequence of the ongoing global economic crisis is that it has put a little time back on the carbon clock. Because the climate damage done by greenhouse gases is cumulative, the emissions decrease attributable to the recession has given the world a bit more room to devise a plan that might actually work. The prospects for a meaningful worldwide climate agreement probably improved last November, with the election of Barack Obama, but his commitments to economic recovery and carbon reduction—to bringing the country out of recession while also reducing U.S. greenhouse emissions to seventeen per cent of their 2005 level by 2050—don't pull in the same direction. Creating "green jobs," a key component of the agenda, is different from creating new jobs, since green jobs, if they're truly green, displace non-green jobs—wind-turbine mechanics instead of oil-rig roughnecks—probably a zero-sum game, as far as employment is concerned. The ultimate success or failure of Obama's program, and of the measures that will be introduced in Copenhagen this year, will depend on our willingness, once the global economy is no longer teetering, to accept policies that will seem to be nudging us back toward the abyss.

—*David Owen*



"In my day, there was no reward for incompetence."

IN THE WOODS
AXES AND ARROWS

Every few days, the New York City Police Department sends around an internal memo detailing recent crimes that have elicited particular public interest. Last week, according to Paul Browne, a department spokesperson, these were "the arrow, when models attacked, and the trees." Why people wanted to hear about the models—thousands of them caused a stampede outside a casting call in midtown—was obvious. They're models. But the fixation of New Yorkers on the two other incidents reflected a darker cast of mind. On Sunday, in Riverdale, a woman fetching a platter of lamb from the trunk of her car was struck in the gut by a thirty-inch arrow. Around the same time, it emerged that seventeen trees in Inwood Hill Park had been attacked by someone with an axe or a machete. The wantonness of these acts, along with the crudeness of the weapons, suggested that something almost medieval was under way—"Braveheart" in the Bronx. The attention devoted to the incidents was, in Browne's words, "not what you usually associate with a large metropolitan area." People seemed to read into them a vindication of their sense that the whole world was going to hell. Was this the leading edge of a siege or just the usual weirdness, seen in a new context?

The really bizarre thing about the arrow shooting is that it already existed as an urban legend. "People would always say, 'Oh, years ago someone was walking down West End Avenue and suddenly he felt a terrible pain in his foot. He looked down and there was an arrow,’ ” Eleanor Wachs, the author of “Crime-Victim Stories,” a book about New York City’s criminal folklore, said. She explained that stories like “The Arrow Shooter” often begin with some germ of truth, and morph, in the retelling, to reflect the paranoias of the place and time. In Riverdale, everyone seemed to have a theory about the archer: “Some stupid kid fooling around, probably some man” (Joyce Jacobson, sitting outside the Schervier Nursing Care Center, where the attack occurred); “Someone who didn’t get the memo that people are using more advanced weaponry these days” (Kevin Deutsch, the *Riverdale Press’s* lead reporter on the case); “Indians!” (a man at the nursing center). Deutsch said that at the paper the culprit had acquired the nickname the Riverdale Robin Hood. (Deutsch had lobbied for William Tellowitz.) “We’ve really been enjoying calling him ‘the bowman,’” he said. On Thursday, police arrested a twenty-seven-year-old plumber named Eric Collins for the shooting. They said he had aimed the arrow at a fence while taking a break from moving into a new house, which didn’t exactly clarify things.

Across the Harlem River, at the main entrance to Inwood Hill Park, a sign was posted on a gate: “Arboricide.” Adrian Benepe, the Parks Commissioner, had called the chopping “a methodical serial attack just to kill trees,” and was offering a two-thousand-dollar reward. Jennifer Hoppa, the administrator for Northern Manhattan Parks, said, “It’s malicious, it’s so evil and sinister.”

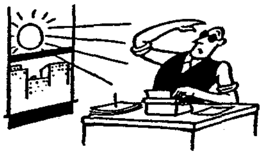
Mike Fois, walking his beagle in the park, had ideas about the chopper: “Someone shopping for firewood, which is stupid—green trees are horrible for firewood”; a “disgruntled park worker”; “a disturbed person hearing voices in the tree.” His best guess: “Just a nutter.” Enrique Wallace, who was walking a Rottweiler, suggested, “Maybe it’s the same guy that flashes people.” There had been earlier raids, on Eastern red cedars and cottonwoods, in the meadow areas of the park. Hoppa thought that their perpetrator might have been a meadow partisan, “someone who is anti-forest.” But the latest attack—four tulip trees, a bunch of sugar maples, a red oak, a kwanzan cherry, a bitternut hickory, and hackberries—seemed random. “It’s multiple species scattered around a diverse area,” Hoppa said. She gestured toward a jagged hackberry stump. “*What? Why?*” she said. “We’ve since had to cut it, so that it wouldn’t be an impalement hazard.”

George L. Kelling, the criminologist who helped conceive the broken-windows theory, said, “There’s this fear of the slideback. People wonder, is an upsurge in incidents like this a precursor to a general surge?” But he didn’t think that the broken tree trunks, or the flying arrows, augured impending mayhem. “I don’t see any leading edge at the present,” he said.

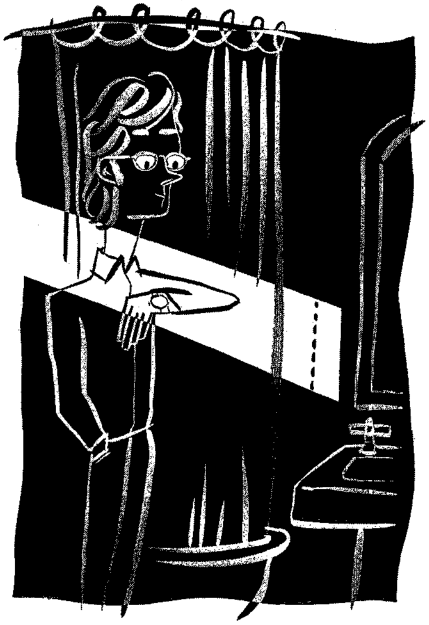
Joel Kaye, a professor of medieval history at Barnard, said that he had not thought about the week’s news in the context of the Middle Ages, though he did point out that, suddenly, usury is a hot topic again. “I will tell you that I always bristle at the use of ‘medieval’ for ‘primitive,’ ” he said. “Modern people are not only doing the things that are called ‘medieval’ but doing them at times with gusto and greater will than they were ever done then.” Like what? “Murdering each other, starving each other.” Whatever anyone thinks, compared with this time last year, crime in the city, according to the Police Department, is down fourteen per cent.

—*Lauren Collins*

NATURAL PHENOMENA
BROOKLYNHENGE



Shortly before the vernal equinox last year, Trevor MacDermid, who lives in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, noticed an unusual bar of light next to his shower curtain. After some confusion, he concluded that the setting sun, hovering briefly between the branches of a neighbor’s tree and a distant chimney, was positioned at such an angle that its rays cleared a potted plant hanging in front of his kitchen window, the doorjamb of his bathroom, and a medicine cabinet beyond. He rushed to fetch a pencil, and traced the outline of the light, but by the time he thought to add the date and the approximate time (6 P.M.) “the golden sliver,” as he called it, had vanished. “I didn’t see the Virgin Mary on a croissant,” he conceded recently, but, in an age of global warming and overdevelopment, a man predisposed to mark the changing of the seasons through natural observation will take what he can get: a domestic Stonehenge. “It could be an annual celebration,” he said. “Why not? In my mind, it’s no more or less arbitrary than—I mean, I don’t want to say Christmas, but basically.”



As the first anniversary of his sighting approached, MacDermid, who is thirty-three, sent an e-mail to some friends. “I’d like you to come over to my house before 6:00 P.M. on Thursday,” he wrote. “There’s going to be a celestial occurrence in my bathroom.” Privately, he was uncertain of the prospects for a repeat event. In the intervening twelve months, a new condominium, which he referred to as “that big glacier,” had gone up down the block, threatening to obscure his view of the setting sun, and, when the day arrived, it was intermittently overcast. He found nine dollars in his pocket and bought three forty-ounce bottles of beer to serve as refreshments.

A little before six, MacDermid, a freelance creative consultant, greeted his first guest as a couple of airplanes flew overhead. “We are directly in the flight pattern for J.F.K.,” he said. “In the middle part of the day—and I’ve been home more lately—the shadow of the plane passes over the house, which is really amazing." The recession, if nothing else, may be good for reacquainting ourselves with the wonders of our surroundings. "By the way, do you know about the Manhattan solstice?" MacDermid said, referring to a semi-annual phenomenon, sometimes known as Manhattanhenge, in which the sun sets on a perfect horizontal axis with the grid of streets. "If you're anywhere on Fifth Avenue, it's a real thrill."

Six o'clock approached, and MacDermid began to worry that his guests might turn up fashionably late, thereby missing his fleeting occasion. Finally, the doorbell rang. "Hey, is it happening?" a woman named Allison asked. "I was, like, running from class."

"It's almost like the ball dropping, but it's softer than that," MacDermid said, and peered into the bathroom, where a diffuse light now shone against the edge of the shower curtain.

The hour turned without fanfare, and soon MacDermid's next-door neighbor Fabrice arrived. "So did you answer the question yet: Why did you get so excited about this?" he asked. Fabrice looked out the kitchen window and spotted the condominium. "You're screwed," he said. "That fucking building is going to cut you off."

A few more guests trickled in, and suddenly, while MacDermid was serving them beer, the cloud coverage dissipated. "Oh, my God, it's happening," Allison said as a rectangular light sabre, about fifteen inches high and two inches wide, aligned more or less precisely with MacDermid's pencil marks. Three cell phones were held up to note the official time: "I have 6:19." "I have 6:17." "I have 6:18." So much for satellite technology.

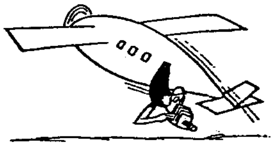
Then, just like that, the light was gone. The doorbell rang again: too late. The bathroom was deemed free for its proper use, and Fabrice went in and closed the door. The guests began to talk about going out for pizza, and as MacDermid reached for a coat—winter hadn't quit yet—he received a new text message: "Want to make it. Close to meeting end, but must stop home. How to get to your house?"

"What the fuck?" MacDermid said. "It's six-fifty-two."

The next evening, MacDermid looked again, just in case, but the wall didn't light up.

—*Ben McGrath*

AT THE GALLERIES
WAR STORY



The other night, a group of hard-core journalist types gathered at the Umbrage gallery, in DUMBO, for an exhibition of black-and-white photographs by the late Eddie Adams. The centerpiece was Adams's 1968 Pulitzer Prize-winning photograph, taken for the Associated Press, of Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the police chief of South Vietnam, firing a bullet into the head of a Vietcong suspect. The exhibit, which coincides with the release of "Eddie Adams: Vietnam," a book put together by Adams's widow, Alyssa, features much work that has never been seen, printed from a cache of negatives that Adams's first wife, Ann, discovered inside some plastic garbage bags in her garage. (A documentary about Adams, "An Unlikely Weapon," comes out in New York in April.) Hal Buell, a former A.P. editor who knew Adams "for a hundred years," and who wrote the text for the book, said it seemed fitting that the photographer's work had been misplaced: "That's a disease of daily picture journalism. We're so busy doing *today* that sometimes history gets shunted aside and ends up in a bag somewhere."

More of Adams's old friends showed up—the Pulitzer laureates John Filo, who took the 1970 Kent State photograph, and Nick Ut, who took the 1972 picture of a naked Vietnamese girl covered in napalm (Kim Phuc, whom Ut took to the hospital before he delivered his film, and with whom he has since become friends). Ut, who is Vietnamese, met Adams through his brother, Huynh Thanh My, also a photographer, who was killed in 1965, while covering a battle between the Vietcong and the SVN Rangers for the A.P. "After my brother was killed, Eddie always worried about me," Ut said. "He took care of me very well." Pete Hamill, who was sent to Vietnam by the *Post*, met Adams in 1965. "We would hang out at the Caravelle Hotel bar, up on the roof—beautiful views of Saigon," Hamill said. "And at the A.P. bureau—in those days you would hope to convince some pilot to mail your story for you, or you would file by cable at the bureau." He talked about Adams's politics: "Eddie wasn't partisan. He had been a marine. When he finally left Vietnam, he worked for *Parade*, doing portraits. He didn't want to cover any more wars, understandably. He wanted to be taken seriously as someone other than the person who had taken the photograph of the execution of a Vietcong suspect. But he knew he couldn't get away with it."

Hamill said he doubted that there could be a contemporary equivalent to Adams's execution picture. "The most famous photos out of Iraq are Abu Ghraib, and those are by amateurs," he said. "In Vietnam there was an amazing amount of freedom given to the press. Some soldiers would be going out and you'd say, 'You got room?' With Iraq and Afghanistan there's no way to get out there—there's nothing. They're fortresses."

Chris Hondros, a photographer for Getty Images, had just returned from his thirteenth trip to Iraq. He pointed to a picture of Adams, wearing a set of sixties-era military fatigues, with a Leica and a Nikon strung around his neck. "None of us in Iraq would in a million years be caught wearing a uniform like this now," Hondros said. "It ties into the larger issues of separation between the media and the military, which stems from the Vietnam era." Of Adams's execution picture, he said, "That picture is almost a template of what a photographer tries to do in Iraq. At least so far, a truly iconic picture like that has not emerged." He took one photograph, he said, that reminds people of Adams. "It's a picture of a little girl. It was after a checkpoint shooting with U.S. soldiers. They shot up a car coming toward them, and it turned out it was just an Iraqi family. They killed the parents, who were in the front seat, and the children in the back survived." Hondros's picture shows the girl, one of the survivors, crouching at the feet of an American soldier and holding out her hands, which are covered with blood. "It ran all over the world," he said. "I got a lot of e-mails—'This picture is going to stop the war, just like Eddie Adams's picture.' This was in January, 2005. And that didn't happen."

—*Shauna Lyon*

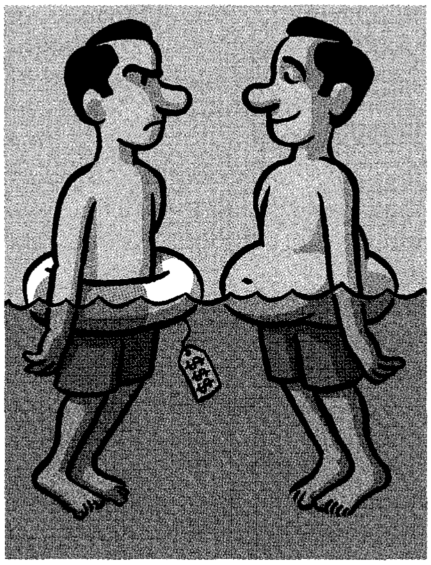
THE FINANCIAL PAGE
CONTINENTAL DRIFT

In American politics, "Europe" is usually a code word for "big government." So in the midst of a global recession, with the U.S. and China shelling out trillions in fiscal stimulus, you might expect that European governments would be spending furiously, too. Far from it. While the U.S. is devoting almost six per cent of its G.D.P. to fiscal stimulus, France and Germany are spending a barely noticeable twenty-six billion euros and fifty billion euros, respectively. Whereas the U.S. hopes that the upcoming G20 summit will lead to a global stimulus package, European policymakers have been warning against the dangers of "crass Keynesianism." The U.S. Federal Reserve has been flooding our economy with money, but the European Central Bank has cut interest rates slowly and reluctantly. Far from wild-eyed leftists, Europeans are looking downright conservative.

Europe's response has earned it plenty of criticism, with pundits arguing that its politicians are oblivious of the seriousness of the crisis. There may be some truth in this charge, but Europe's caution also reflects important differences between its economy and ours, as well as a profoundly different attitude toward things like inflation and debt. If European and American policymakers seem, in their public statements, to be dealing with two very different financial crises, it's because, in some sense, they are.

To begin with, the biggest European countries, which have the most influence on policy, have not been crushed by this recession. In countries like Ireland and Spain, where huge housing bubbles burst, the devastation has been immense. But in Germany, where there was no bubble, fewer people are struggling with debt or watching their wealth go up in smoke. To be sure, Germany's economy, which is heavily dependent on exports, is not in good shape; it looks set to shrink more this year than the U.S. economy. But the unemployment rate in Germany has risen much less than it has here. Indeed, in most of Europe job losses have been less severe, in part because unemployment was already quite high. The U.S. unemployment rate has risen nearly three percentage points since January, 2008. Europe's is up barely one per cent.

In addition, since most European countries have an elaborate social safety net, a recession has a less dramatic impact on people's daily lives. In the U.S., unemployment insurance pays relatively little and runs out relatively quickly, so losing a job usually means a precipitous decline in income. In European countries, unemployment benefits are typically substantial and long-lasting. This is not entirely a plus—it probably makes unemployment higher than it otherwise would be—but in hard times it keeps money in people's pockets. (And paying for it means that European government spending automatically rises quite a bit during recessions.) Furthermore, universal health care enables Europeans to see a doctor even if they're out of work.



None of this means that Europeans are indifferent to recessions or unemployment. But it does reduce the pressure to get their economies moving again at any cost. Furthermore, there seems to be an underlying difference in psychology. Americans talk a good game about the need for balanced budgets and fiscal responsibility, but we've proved ourselves happy to borrow trillions in order to maintain our life styles. And, while Americans hate inflation, they love economic growth more: the Federal Reserve's mission is not just to fight inflation but also to maximize employment. Europe runs a much tighter ship: if an E.U. member has a deficit of greater than three per cent of G.D.P., it's subject to disciplinary action. And the European Central Bank has only one mandate: keep inflation low.

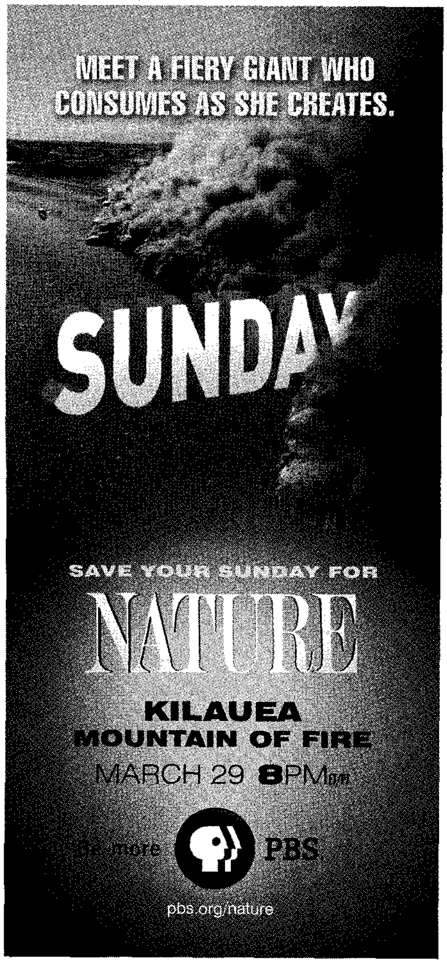
European economic policy seems to reflect the conviction that inflation, not stagnation, is the greatest threat to an economy. If the episode that haunts the U.S. is the Great Depression, in Europe, where the Germans have been dominant in shaping economic policy, the defining historical moment is the hyperinflation of Weimar Germany, when prices rose more than seventy-five billion per cent in just one year, 1923, and, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "trust, calm, and health" vanished. The legacy of that episode lives on not just in German policymakers' inflation phobia but also in their sense that there is something fundamentally distasteful about debt. For Germany, fiscal rectitude even in the face of a crisis is not just economically sensible but morally correct.

There's a price to be paid for hostility toward fiscal stimulus and easy money: Europe and, arguably, the world will take longer to recover. But European policymakers seem willing to weather this outcome in exchange for stability. They're also probably counting on the fact that, even as they sit tight, their economies will get a boost from the American and Chinese stimulus packages. The thing about government spending is that it "leaks": a good chunk of our stimulus package will buy other countries' goods. So Europeans can avoid getting too deeply into debt and still reap some of the benefits of our borrowing. This is unfair: in effect, Europe is refusing to carry its share of the global economic burden and is piggybacking on us. But it's hard to see how things could have turned out otherwise. The U.S. economy, much more than Europe's, is like the proverbial shark: if it doesn't keep moving forward, it dies (or at least creates a lot of misery). In some sense, we need economic growth more than Europe does. It's not surprising that we're going to be the ones who end up paying for it.

—*James Surowiecki*

NEWYORKER.COM
The Balance Sheet, James Surowiecki's blog.

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN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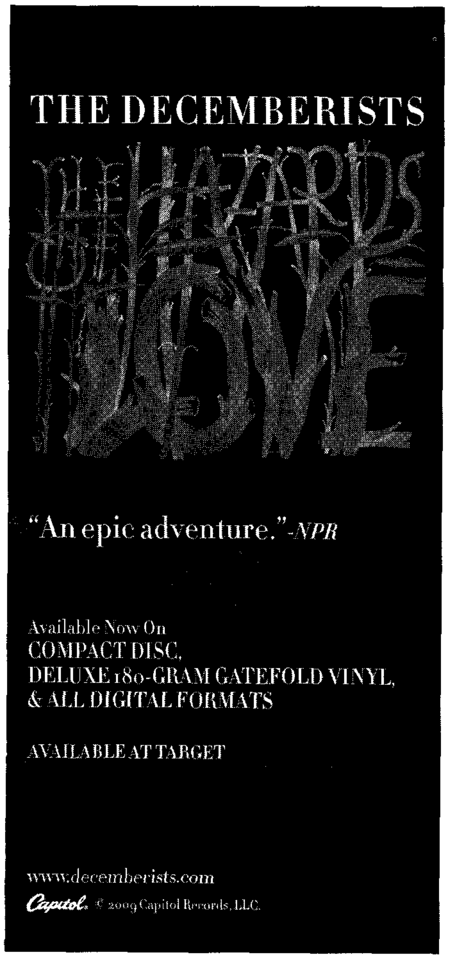
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REFLECTIONS

AUTHOR, AUTHOR?

Life among the shopping carts.

BY DAVID SEDARIS

If anything should be bracketed by matching bookends, I suppose it's an author tour. The ones I'd undertaken in the past began in one independent or chain store, and ended, a month or so later, in another. The landscape, though, has changed since then, and it's telling that on this latest tour I started and finished at a Costco.

The first one I went to was in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. I was spending the weekend with my sister Lisa, gearing up for six weeks of travel, when her husband, Bob, expressed a need for light bulbs. "Anyone game for a quick ride to Costco?" he asked, and before he could even find his keys I was panting, doglike, beside the front door.

Living in cities, it's easy to avoid the big-box superstores. Their merciless lighting, their stench of rubber and cheap molded plastic—it's not the way I normally like to shop. At Costco, though, I'd found displays of pain relievers: Anacin, Bayer, Tylenol. Eight major brands were represented. Pills were paired into single-serving envelopes, then stapled in rows to a bright sheet of poster board. It looked like something you'd see behind the counter at a gas station. There the packets might cost two dollars each, but here the entire display—maybe a hundred and fifty doses—went for just twelve bucks.

At home, I'd buy a bottle of Bufferin or ibuprofen and leave it at that, but when I'm on tour it's packets I need—not for myself but to give as gifts to the people who've come to see me. Say it's someone's birthday or anniversary: I always offer the shampoos and conditioners taken from my hotels. But they provide only so many, and with a good-sized crowd you're empty-handed before you know it.

Adults get something for special occasions, but the bulk of my presents go to teen-agers, who qualify by virtue of their very existence. Real fun is right at their fingertips, but instead of taking bong hits in a stolen car, or getting pregnant in a neighbor's toolshed, they've come to a bookstore to hear a middle-aged man read out loud. And for that they deserve a token of my gratitude. "Here you are," I'll say to a sixteen-year-old. "Put this in your purse or glove compartment and think of me the next time you get a hangover."

For this last tour, my gifts were pretty paltry. I'd bought eight dozen safety pins in Greece, and while they *were* foreign, they didn't look much different from what you could get in the States. Ditto the German Band-Aids. So when Bob mentioned Costco I felt that all my problems had been solved.

As with every big-box store in Winston-Salem, it took fifteen minutes to drive there and another fifteen minutes to cross the parking lot. If the building seemed large from the outside, inside it was twice as big, the kind of space that has its own weather. The carts, too, were slightly oversized, and made me appear even smaller than I actually am. Pushing one toward the hardware section, my brother-in-law and I looked like a pair of twelve-year-olds, the sort with that disease that speeds up the aging process and leaves them wizened and tragic.

This store didn't have the light bulbs Bob wanted, so we trudged on to the drug section, which proved equally disappointing. Pain relievers were in ten-gallon jars rather than packets, and so I looked around for another gift that a teen-ager might appreciate. I wanted something light and individually wrapped, and settled, finally, upon a mess of condoms, which came in a box the size of a cinder block. It was a lot of protection, but not a lot of weight, and

I liked that. "All right," I said to Bob. "I think these should do the trick."

Putting them in the cart, I thought nothing of it, but a moment later, walking down the aisle with my fifty-nine-year-old brother-in-law, I started feeling patently, almost titanically gay. Maybe I was imagining things, but it seemed as if people were staring at us—people in families, mostly, led by thrifty and disapproving parents who looked at what we were buying and narrowed their eyes in judgment. *You homosexuals*, their faces seemed to say. *Is that all you ever think about*?

My brother-in-law is around my height, with thick graying hair, a matching mustache, and squarish wire-rimmed glasses. I'd never imagined him as gay, much less as my boyfriend, but now I couldn't stop. "We've got to get something else in this cart," I told him.

Bob disappeared into the acreage reserved for produce and returned a minute later with a four-pound box of strawberries. This somehow made us look even gayer. "After anal sex, we like shortcake!" read the cartoon bubble now floating over our heads.

"Something else," I said. "We've got to get something else."

Bob, oblivious, looked up at the rafters and thought for a moment. "I guess I could use some olive oil."

"Forget it," I told him, my voice a bark. "Let's just pay up and go. Can we do that, please?"

I'd later wonder what the T.S.A. inspectors must have thought. My tour began, and every few days, upon arriving in some new city, I'd find a slip of paper in my suitcase, the kind they throw in after going through all your stuff. Five dress shirts, three pairs of pants, underwear, a dop kit full of Band-Aids and safety pins, two neckties, and several hundred rubbers—what sort of person does the mind cobble together from these ingredients?

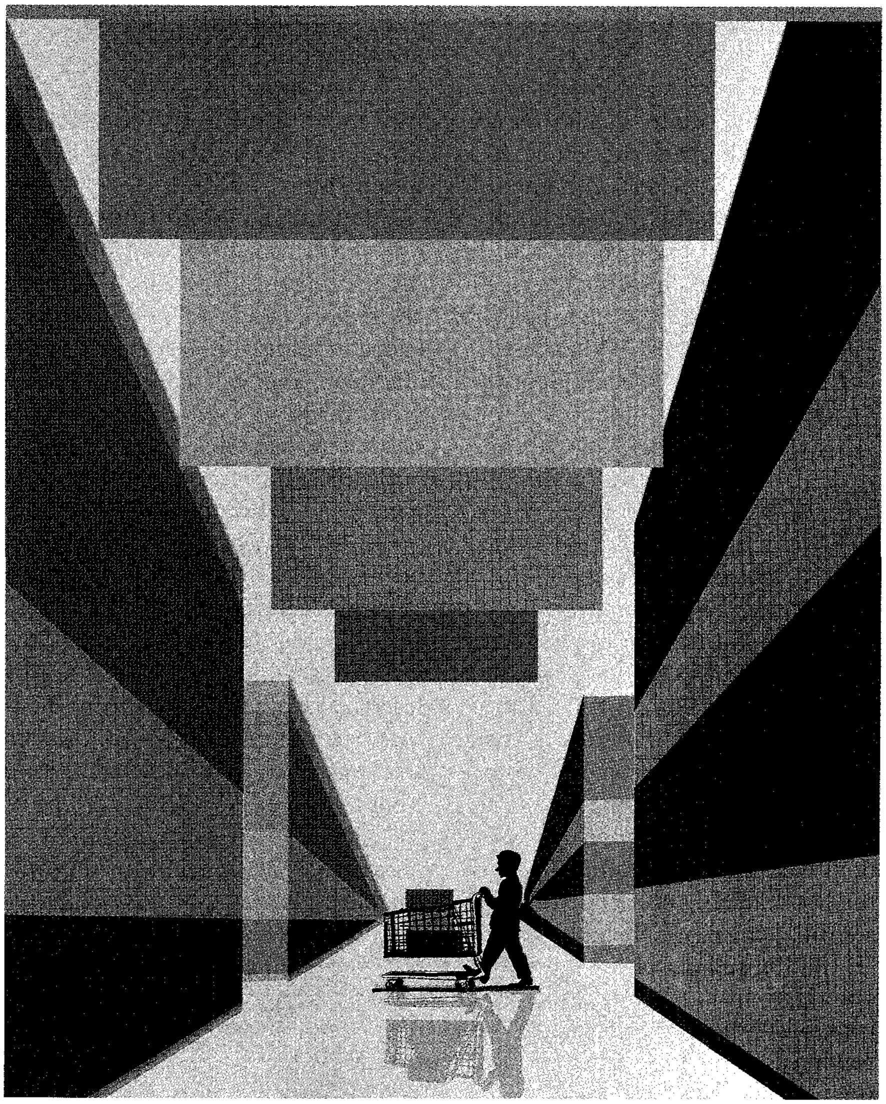
As the weeks passed, my suitcase grew more and more conventional. "I've got something for you," I'd say to a teen-ager. "It's nothing huge, just a little something to show I care."

The kids who went to good schools would roll their eyes. "I can get those in the health room," they told me. And, in the voice of a person whose upbringing was so fundamentally different that he might as well have been raised by shepherds, I would say, "Really? For free?"

Unlike a lot of authors I know, I enjoy my book tours—love them, as a matter of fact. That said, I'm in a fortunate position, and have been able to eliminate the parts that don't agree with me—the picture-taking, for instance. People all have cameras on their cell phones now, and, figuring, I guess, that they might as well aim them at something, they'd ask me to stand and pose a good thirty times a night. This wasn't an inconvenience so much as an embarrassment. "You can do better than me," I'd tell them. And when they insisted that they really couldn't I'd feel even worse. Thus, at readings there's now a notice propped atop my book-signing table. "Sorry," it announces, "but we don't allow photos."

"If it's their rule, I guess I'll have to go along with it," I tell people, sighing, as if I were really disappointed.

With the picture-taking out of the way, I'm completely free to enjoy myself, which I generally do—and immensely. Every night, after a reading



ZOHAR LAZAR

and a question-and-answer session, I'll sit and talk to hundreds of strangers. This fellow, for instance, whom I met in Toronto. I liked his glasses, and, after I asked where he had got them, we fell into the topic of corrective surgery. "I hear that you have to remain conscious during the procedure," he told me, "and that when the laser hits its target you can actually smell your own eyeball, sizzling."

I thought about this for days, just as I thought of the special-ed teacher I met in Pittsburgh. "You know," I said, "I hear those words and automatically think 'handicapped' or 'learning disabled.' But aren't a lot of your students just assholes?"

"You got it," she said. Then she told me about a kid—last day of class—who wrote on the blackboard, "Mrs. J____ is a cock master."

I was impressed, because I'd never heard that term before. She was impressed because the boy had spelled it correctly.

For hours each night I would talk to people, asking pretty much whatever I wanted. The trick, of course, is to match the right person with the right question. Take this young woman I met in Boston a few years back. I'd been signing for almost six hours, and when she finally stepped up to the table my mind went blank. "When, um . . . When did you last touch a monkey?" I asked.

I expected "Never," or "It's been years," but instead she took a step back, saying, "Oh, can you smell it on me?"

The young woman's name was Jennifer, and it turned out that she worked for Helping Hands, an organization that trains monkeys to work as slaves for paralyzed people. At her invitation, I visited the facility, outside Boston, and spent a pleasant afternoon having my pockets picked by some of the cleverer students.

On my most recent tour, my questions were pretty standard: "What was the last reading you attended?" "Who are you going to use this condom on?" "If you stepped out of the shower and saw a leprechaun standing at the base of your toilet, would you scream, or would you innately understand that he meant you no harm?"

Late at night, I'd return to my room, scoop up the shampoos and conditioners replaced as part of the turn-down service, and record everything that I had learned, not just the stories that people had told me but all the ephemera: The names of local restaurants and hair salons seen from the car window. One hotel with its Martini Tuesdays, another with its Fajita Fridays. In Baton Rouge, a woman asked me to name her donkey. "Stephanie," I said, and later that night, too tired to sleep, I lay awake and wondered if I'd spoken too quickly.

In 2004, I offered priority signing to smokers, the reason being that, because they didn't have as long to live, their time was more valuable. This year, my special treatment was reserved for men who stood five feet six and under. "That's right, my little friends," I announced. "There'll be no waiting in line for you." It seemed unfair to restrict myself to men, and so I included any woman with braces on her teeth.

"What about us?" asked the pregnant and the lame. And, because it was my show, I told them to wait their fucking turn.

After a month in the United States, I flew to Canada to finish my tour. On my first night in Toronto, I read at a chain store called Indigo. That event ended at midnight, and the following afternoon, after half a dozen radio and print interviews, I was taken to Costco, not to buy pain relievers and condoms but to meet my readers. Or, rather, not meet them. My appearance had been advertised by way of flyer and was to last no longer than an hour. Shoppers passed with their enormous carts, most loaded with children, who gaped through the bars at this ridiculous nobody, sitting by himself at a folding table. Making it just that much more pathetic was the sign next to me, the big one reading "No Photos, Please."

It would be my greatest pleasure not to take your picture, I imagined people thinking. *I mean, really, just who the hell do you think you are?*

It's a question well suited to a cavernous space. There your eyes can roam heavenward, past the signs for frozen food and automotive supplies, past the arrow pointing to the cash registers, and on to that boundless parking lot, which leads, eventually, to home. ♦

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From a letter to the editor in the Times.

If there is a practical plan to do it, someone ought to lay it out. The point is, we have a multi-trillion-dollar problem. The mother of all balloons had all but burst, and the government is looking for ways to let the air out slowly to allow the economy to recover. This is a bear of a problem, and we had better take a deep breath and get used to putting out the fires where we can and not expect too much each day along the way.

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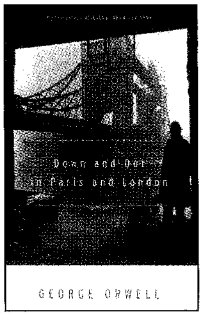
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SHOUTS & MURMURS

TAILS OF MANHATTAN

BY WOODY ALLEN

Two weeks ago, Abe Moscowitz dropped dead of a heart attack and was reincarnated as a lobster. Trapped off the coast of Maine, he was shipped to Manhattan and dumped into a tank at a posh Upper East Side seafood restaurant. In the tank there were several other lobsters, one of whom recognized him. "Abe, is that you?" the creature asked, his antennae perking up.

"Who's that? Who's talking to me?" Moscowitz said, still dazed by the mystical slam-bang postmortem that had transmogrified him into a crustacean.

"It's me, Moe Silverman," the other lobster said.

"O.M.G.!" Moscowitz piped, recognizing the voice of an old gin-rummy colleague. "What's going on?"

"We're reborn," Moe explained. "As a couple of two-pounders."

"Lobsters? This is how I wind up after leading a just life? In a tank on Third Avenue?"

"The Lord works in strange ways," Moe Silverman explained. "Take Phil Pinchuck. The man keeled over with an aneurysm, he's now a hamster. All day, running at the stupid wheel. For years he was a Yale professor. My point is he's gotten to like the wheel. He pedals and pedals, running nowhere, but he smiles."

Moscowitz did not like *his* new condition at all. Why should a decent citizen like himself, a dentist, a mensch who deserved to relive life as a soaring eagle or ensconced in the lap of some sexy socialite getting his fur stroked, come back ignominiously as an entrée on a menu? It was his cruel fate to be delicious, to turn up as Today's Special, along with a baked potato and dessert. This led to a discussion by the two lobsters of the mysteries of existence, of religion, and how capricious the universe was, when someone like Sol Drazin, a schlemiel they knew from the catering business, came back after a fatal stroke as a stud horse impregnating cute little thoroughbred fillies for high fees. Feeling sorry for himself and angry, Moscowitz swam about, unable to buy into Silverman's Buddha-like resignation over the prospect of being served thermidor.

At that moment, who walked into the restaurant and sits down at a nearby table but Bernie Madoff. If Moscowitz had been bitter and agitated before, now he gasped as his tail started churning the water like an Evinrude.

"I don't believe this," he said, pressing his little black peepers to the glass walls. "That goniff who should be doing time, chopping rocks, making license plates, somehow slipped out of his apartment confinement and he's treating himself to a shore dinner."

"Clock the ice on his immortal beloved," Moe observed, scanning Mrs. M.'s rings and bracelets.

Moscowitz fought back his acid reflux, a condition that had followed him from his former life. "He's the reason I'm here," he said, riled to a fever pitch.

"Tell me about it," Moe Silverman said. "I played golf with the man in Florida, which incidentally he'll move the ball with his foot if you're not watching."

"Each month I got a statement from him," Moscowitz ranted. "I knew such numbers looked too good to be kosher, and when I joked to him how it sounded like a Ponzi scheme he choked on his kugel. I had to do the Heimlich maneuver. Finally, after all that high living, it comes out he was a fraud and my net worth was bupkes. P.S., I had a myocardial infarction that registered at the oceanography lab in Tokyo."

"With me he played it coy," Silverman said, instinctively frisking his carapace for a Xanax. "He told me at first he had no room for another investor. The more he put me off, the more I wanted in. I had him to dinner, and because he liked Rosalee's blintzes he promised me the next opening would be mine. The day I found out he could handle my account I was so thrilled I cut my wife's head out of our wedding photo and put his in. When I learned I was broke, I committed suicide by jumping off the roof of our golf club in Palm Beach. I had to wait half an hour to jump, I was twelfth in line."

At this moment, the captain escorted Madoff to the lobster tank, where the unctuous sharpie analyzed the assorted saltwater candidates for potential succulence and pointed to Moscowitz and Silverman. An obliging smile played on the captain's face as he summoned a waiter to extract the pair from the tank.

"This is the last straw!" Moscowitz cried, bracing himself for the consummate outrage. "To swindle me out of my life's savings and then to nosh me in butter sauce! What kind of universe is this?"

Moscowitz and Silverman, their ire reaching cosmic dimensions, rocked the tank to and fro until it toppled off its table, smashing its glass walls and flooding the hexagonal-tile floor. Heads turned as the alarmed captain looked on in stunned disbelief. Bent on vengeance, the two lobsters scuttled swiftly after Madoff. They reached his table in an instant, and Silverman went for his ankle. Moscowitz, summoning the strength of a madman, leaped from the floor and with one giant pincer took firm hold of Madoff's nose. Screaming with pain, the gray-haired con artist hopped from the chair as Silverman strangled his instep with both claws. Patrons could not believe their eyes as they recognized Madoff, and began to cheer the lobsters.

"This is for the widows and charities!" yelled Moscowitz. "Thanks to you, Hatikvah Hospital is now a skating rink!"

Madoff, unable to free himself from the two Atlantic denizens, bolted from the restaurant and fled yelping into traffic. When Moscowitz tightened his viselike grip on his septum and Silverman tore through his shoe, they persuaded the oily scammer to plead guilty and apologize for his monumental hustle.

By the end of the day, Madoff was in Lenox Hill Hospital, awash in welts and abrasions. The two renegade main courses, their rage slaked, had just enough strength left to flop away into the cold, deep waters of Sheepshead Bay, where, if I'm not mistaken, Moscowitz lives to this day with Yetta Belkin, whom he recognized from shopping at Fairway. In life she had always resembled a flounder, and after her fatal plane crash she came back as one. ♦

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THE SPORTING SCENE

WHAT WOULD JESUS BET?

A math whiz hones the optimal poker strategy.

BY ALEC WILKINSON

Poker played poorly is purely a gambler’s game. Losers tend to think that they didn’t get the cards, and not that they were beaten by someone who played better than they did. They return to the table and wait for big hands and lose more. Accomplished players strive to diminish the effects of luck. From the pattern of their opponents’ bets and behaviors, they work like detectives to determine their cards. They play opportune hands deceptively, and feckless ones, too, and shed unpromising ones before the cards cause them too much harm. They know that some hands that seem auspicious are not, and that others are stronger than they appear.

Games for which a flawless strategy is known are said to be solved. Tic-tac-toe is solved; blackjack is solved; checkers is solved. Chess is not solved, and poker is not, either. Solutions theoretically exist; they are simply too intricate, so far, to be comprehended. Among mathematicians, chess is regarded as a game of perfect information, because nothing is hidden. If its ideal strategy were discovered, there would no longer be any reason to play it—no move could be made for which the response was not already identified. Poker is a game of imperfect information, since so much is concealed. Solving it would not overcome the disadvantage of being unable to know why your opponent is acting as he is. Such concepts derive from an abstruse field of applied mathematics called game theory, which was formulated, in the nineteen-forties, to address difficult economic problems.

Game theory was conceptualized by John von Neumann, who was one of the mathematicians involved in the Manhattan Project, and collaborated with Albert Einstein. In 1944, Von Neumann, with Oskar Morgenstern, published “Theory of Games and Economic Behavior.” Until then, people typically entered markets with a strategy, but such preparation could help them prevail only if they knew what other people would do. Game theory provided a tool. Von Neumann saw that the tidal rhythms of transactions and uncertainties involved in markets were embodied in the narratives of parlor games, and especially in poker, where each player also has a strategy to claim the largest share of the money changing hands. Since the strategies of most games were subject, if simplified, to fairly concise mathematical calculations, the workings of markets could be also.

“Theory of Games and Economic Behavior” is riddled with charts, equations, and diagrams. Without an understanding of higher math, it is impenetrable. In an essay reprinted in the book’s sixtieth-anniversary edition, John McDonald, quoting John Maynard Keynes, writes, “ ‘Businessmen play a mixed game of skill and chance, the average results of which to the players are not known by those who take a hand.’ Von Neumann’s theory is designed to narrow this gamble. . . . It tries to make the imponderable ponderable.”

To diagram certain game-theory problems, Von Neumann used hands of poker as examples. Fifty years later, it occurred to an amiable U.C.L.A. graduate student named Chris Ferguson to apply game-theory concepts to grand-master poker. Relying on them, he became known, in 2000, as the first person to win a prize of more than a million dollars in a poker tournament.

Chris Ferguson is tall and lanky, with very long brown hair and a brown goatee; his admirers call him Jesus. When he plays cards, he wears a black cowboy hat that he was given by a friend. The brim protrudes over his forehead like an overhang, sometimes throwing his eyes, behind dark glasses, into shadow. At the poker table, he has all the animation of a state trooper handing out a speeding ticket. When he’s especially engaged, he sits almost cataleptically still, with his hands clasped in front of his chin. His right hand is balled into a fist, and his left hand rests open on top of it. To bet, he lowers his right arm like a lever, then returns to his original pose. The gesture is exactly the same whether the bet is a bluff or a boast.

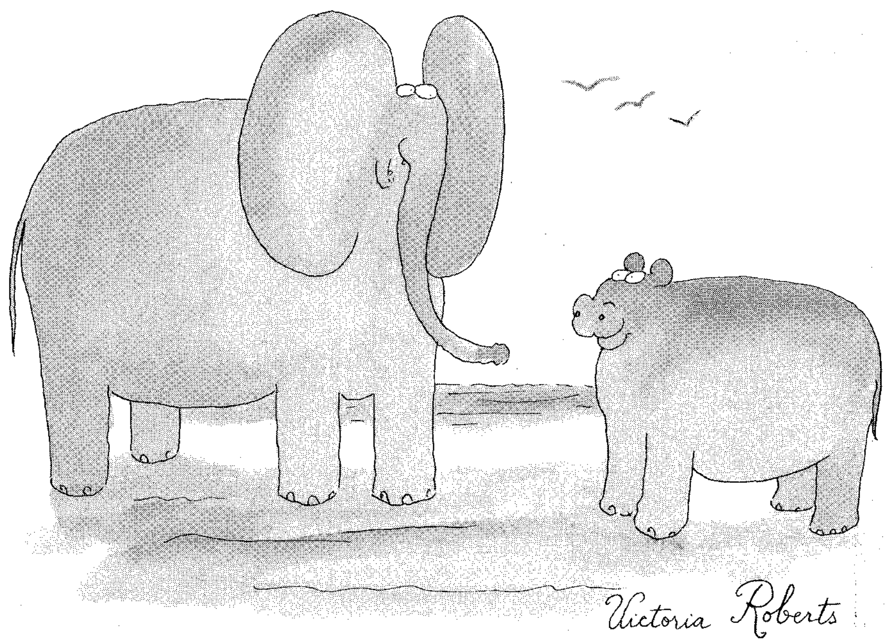
In the 2008 World Series of Poker, in Las Vegas, Ferguson played poker ten hours a day for thirty-five days in a row. On the crown of his hat he wore an adhesive patch bearing the logo for FullTiltPoker.com—a site he helped to launch—as he does whenever he appears in public as a poker player. Ferguson had a room in the Rio Hotel, where the tournament was held, and when he was finished playing, usually around three or four in the morning, he went upstairs and slept until noon, then came back to the lobby and sat down at a table. A few times, he finished at seven in the morning. Eventually, he found himself unable to fall asleep any earlier than that.

One night in Las Vegas, I went to his room so that he could show me some fancy forms of shuffling—cheat forms, shuffles that allow dealers to deal specific cards. (Ferguson is also adept at throwing cards like missiles, which he learned from a book by the magician and card specialist Ricky Jay.) Leaning on one elbow, he used the bed for a table and showed me a double shuffle, a shuffle that appears to be genuine but isn't a shuffle at all—all the cards remain where they were. "I learned it for protection, in the nineties," he said, "to see if people were doing it to me. A really good magician is going to beat a good spotter. A good dealer is supposed to deal in a way that you know he can't be cheating."

Ferguson was born in Los Angeles in 1963. His mother, Beatriz, was a mathematician and his father, Tom, taught game theory at U.C.L.A. Tom Ferguson brought home specialized board games and card games and taught them to Chris and his older brother, Marc, who is now a computer programmer. "Whenever there was a rainy day, we would get to stay inside and play Risk," Tom Ferguson told me. His younger son "learned to think about playing and strategies and what other people know about what you know. It's not important in chess, but it's important in poker. It's a rather deep game, when you get involved."

Ferguson doesn't recall when his father taught him poker—he feels as if he's known it all his life—but he remembers that when he was in the fourth grade he lost thirty-five cents in a game, and it bothered him. In high school, he played on the weekend with friends. At seventeen, accompanied by some of them, he began making occasional trips to Las Vegas. He and his friends would pool gas money, sleep in cheap hotels, and eat at the buffets. He liked Vegas because the people in the casinos called him "sir," and "you could lean back in your chair and no one would yell at you, unlike school." His friends went for fun, but Ferguson went to establish whether he played poker well. "I saw Vegas as a challenge," he told me. "Play ten hours a day, pay for my room and my food, and get home with more money than I started with. I think of that as my transition into manhood—when I was able to prove to myself that if I had no support from my family, and no job,

Chris Ferguson (left) says, "You might get lucky and beat me, but you'll never outplay me." Photograph by Martin Schoeller.



"I've been in three documentaries, but I've never been nominated."

• •

as long as I could get to Vegas, and have a hundred dollars in my pocket, I could survive."

As an undergraduate, at U.C.L.A., Ferguson thought that joining the swing-dance club would be a good way to meet people, and now he is an expert dancer. He met his girlfriend, a Brazilian woman named Fabiola Gomes, at a night club. Gomes, a personal trainer, is petite and animated, with thick ringlets of dark hair. They live in her house in Las Vegas. Until two years ago, Ferguson, who is forty-five, lived mostly with his parents.

From a fifty-two-card deck, 2,598,960 five-card hands are possible. The basis for most poker strategy is a ruthless notion: What can I discern about my opponents' habits that I can attack? Such an approach is called "maximally exploitive." It is the way nearly all professionals proceed, relying on logic and intuition. While he was still a student, Ferguson decided also to employ a method called "optimal strategy," which derives from a game-theory question posed by Claude Chevalley, in 1945, in *View:* "Each player being ignorant of the strategies followed by his opponents, which strategy will he follow in order to get the maximum possible advantage for himself?"

The optimal strategy "doesn't mean 'How do I win the most?'" Ferguson told me when I met him in Las Vegas. It means, when up against an expert opponent, "How do I lose the least?" Part of it is mathematically determining whether one's cards are favorable, but a player using optimal strategy also builds into his play bets that sometimes appear improbable and make it mathematically difficult for the opponent to know what to do. With optimal strategy, "if we're playing heads up, you might get lucky and beat me, but you'll never outplay me," Ferguson said.

Ferguson made occasional trips to Las Vegas during his five years as an undergraduate (he received a degree in math and computer science from U.C.L.A.) and his thirteen years as a graduate student in computer science. On the entry forms of poker tournaments, for many years, he listed his occupation as "student." His thesis adviser was Leonard Kleinrock, whose lab sent what was considered the first message over the Internet, in 1969. Kleinrock told me that Ferguson was "one of the more brilliant and creative young men that I've known in my career at U.C.L.A." During the late eighties, Ferguson was working as a programmer for a more advanced doctoral candidate when the student got a result he couldn't interpret. "Chris, this lowly programmer, writing code, explained what was causing the result," Kleinrock said. "It was a very deep theoretical idea, and his manner was very low-key, no bravado, just pure intelligence, and, when I saw that, I thought, I want to follow through with this guy."

Kleinrock said that Ferguson "would spend hours bouncing ideas around. All kinds of esoteric mathematical and computer subjects—genetic algorithms, search algorithms, and so on—reams of ideas, then he'd come back the next day pursuing some of them, having thrown the others away." He went on, "Or he would show me how he was progressing on cutting the deck down to any number of cards—sixteenth card or thirty-fourth card—and the perfect riffle of them. I was not the type of supervisor to demand a schedule—we were both enjoying the academic and scientific ideas. He was, by far, the student who took the longest to graduate, though." Ferguson finished his doctorate in 1999, when he was thirty-six, by which time he had spent half his life at U.C.L.A. "He was never the go-go academic achiever that wanted to race up there and set the world on fire," Kleinrock said. "Plus, the year after he graduated he became the world champion and won all that money."

Ferguson moved out of his parents' house in California when he became really rich. (Nevada has no income tax.) He has won more than seven million dollars playing poker, and that's still less, apparently, than what he has earned as "something like chairman of the board" of Tiltware, which developed and licensed the software for FullTiltPoker.com, where people play poker, sometimes against Ferguson and other professionals, for money. In 2002, dissatisfied with the customer service of the online poker sites he visited, he saw the opportunity for a site "for the player, by the player, and of the player," and began writing software for it. FullTiltPoker.com began operations two years later. Ferguson and a dozen other pro players involved with the site are known as Team Full Tilt.

Initially, Full Tilt represented a novelty—other sites had pro players affiliated with them, but usually only one or two, and they weren't necessarily available to play hands with customers. "It grew about three per cent a week for the first year, and two per cent a week for the two years after, and suddenly you realize you're there," Ferguson said. According to H2 Gambling Capital, a gaming consultancy, the online poker business made $3.8 billion last year. The largest site is PokerStars.com, which is based on the Isle of Man. FullTiltPoker.com is the second largest, and one of the fastest growing. It has a sister site, FullTiltPoker.net, where only play money is used. Being rich, Ferguson said, makes his attention less acute, but his judgment more reliable. "Your judgment can be skewed if you're desperate," he said.

In 2006, Congress passed the Safe Port Act, which included a measure called the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act. It makes it illegal for banks and credit-card companies and other money-handling operations to transfer funds to online-gambling sites. Some companies promptly withdrew from the online-gambling market in the United States. Full Tilt's servers were already in Canada, in the Mohawk territory of Kahnawake, an Internet-gaming haven; the site's software and customer-service operations had gone to Dublin, which is sometimes called the Silicon Valley of Europe. (The details of the business's current ownership are a bit opaque, owing in part, perhaps, to a pending lawsuit by an early Team Full Tilt member.) Unlike many other sites, Full Tilt continued taking American customers.

The Department of Justice, on its Web site, has a link to an F.B.I. page with the heading "Online Gambling, Don't Roll the Dice." It begins, "If you've ever thought about visiting a cyber casino, here's something you should know: it's illegal to gamble online in the United States." It goes on to say that among the activities that are illegal are "cyber bets on sporting events or in virtual card games."

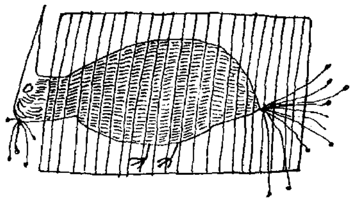
In the minds of many legal scholars, this position is disingenuous—is, in fact, a bluff. It is not clear that any law governs online poker. The Safe Port Act defines a bet or wager as "the staking or risking by any person of something of value upon the outcome of a contest of others, a sporting event, or a game subject to chance." Lawyers and advocates of online poker assert that poker is a game of strategy and not one "subject to chance." Roulette, in which a person can apply no effective plan whatsoever, is a game dominated by chance. The element of chance in poker is addressed tactically—if a player doesn't like his cards, he folds them. "Games of skill need to be distinguished from games of chance," Charles Nesson, a professor at Harvard Law School, told me. "Games of skill, strategic games that apply strategic thinking—checkers, chess, and poker, among them—are not."

The Department of Justice says that, in addition to the Safe Port Act, the Federal Wire Act also applies to online poker. The Wire Act was passed in 1961 to prevent the use of telegraphs and telephones to send horse-racing information to bookies. In 2002, two men argued in the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals that the money they owed their credit-card companies didn't have to be paid, because they had been gambling with it in an online casino, and, according to the Wire Act, gambling online was illegal. The court ruled that the Wire Act specified only bets on sports, and "does not prohibit non-sports internet gambling."

"That ruling gave a lot of comfort to people interested in ramping up gaming sites," Amy Marlyse Burgert, a lawyer in Houston, whose practice includes online gaming, told me. "So long as you weren't sports wagering, you could look at this and see an opportunity."

A spokesperson for the Department of Justice, in an e-mail, told me, "The Department's view for some time has been that all forms of Internet gambling, including sports wagering, casino games and card games, are illegal under federal law. While many of the federal statutes do not use the term 'Internet gambling,' the Department believes that their statutory language is sufficient to cover Internet gambling." As to why there had been no prosecutions for online poker, the spokesperson said, "Just because someone hasn't been prosecuted yet doesn't mean that they won't be."

What this statement amounted to, according to Nesson, was "a threat." He went on to say that "the typical approach to it has been to point out the irrationality of the D.O.J. position, both in legal and, in some sense, logical terms. But that's been a loser argument, because the policy is not about rationality, and it's not about to be displaced by rational argument. It goes deeper than that—it's an appeal to a kind of fundamentalism."



SAUL STEINBERG, BIRDS, 1945 © THE SAUL STEINBERG FOUNDATION

I asked I. Nelson Rose, a professor of law at Whittier Law School and one of the leading authorities on Internet gambling, if he thought Ferguson was breaking any laws. "There may be a state law somewhere, but it isn't easy to find," he said. "You'll notice, though, the prosecutors are not arresting people involved in Internet poker. Ferguson would be easy to grab, assuming you had a good solid law."

By remaining open after the Safe Port Act, Full Tilt and Ferguson "made the best bet in the history of poker," Steven Lipscomb, the head of the World Poker Tour, said. "They deserve a lot of credit for the courage to make a stand." He told me this somewhat grudgingly; his own company had been reluctant to risk entering the American online market, and after the passage of the Safe Port Act it had seen its shares all but collapse. Furthermore, Ferguson and six other players had sued the World Poker Tour in 2006; the case, an antitrust suit, was settled amicably in 2008. "Their site has been wildly successful, and they are richer beyond their wildest dreams of what they'd ever have got from poker," Lipscomb said.

Poker allows two ways to win: own the best hand, or make the best hand go away, sometimes by bluffing. The imperative to bluff, it turns out, is inherent. "I can take a purely mathematical model of poker and hunt for a purely mathematical solution," Harold Kuhn, a professor emeritus at Princeton who knew Von Neumann, told me, "and a phenomenon will appear which has always seemed to be psychological but isn't—it's mathematical—which is that you will bluff, and your opponent will drop out. The necessity for bluffing is built into the mathematics of the model."

Any hand has multiple strategies, Ferguson said. "If I'm facing someone I've never played before and have no idea of his weakness, and I play an optimal strategy, I know I will not make a mistake that will give him any money," he said. "If you don't know the optimal strategy, you don't know your weaknesses or his; you don't know when he's taking advantage of you, and you can take advantage of him. As people deviate from optimal strategy—as they bluff or fold or call too often or not enough—it's actually pretty clear. If you're able to see how they deviate, you can see how to take advantage of them."

A player using optimal strategy assumes that his opponents know he is doing so—in other words, that his strategy has been found out. He can announce, for example, that a third of his bets will be bluffs, and then construct the game in such a way that his opponent still can't tell whether it is better to fold or call. If two players have each put fifty dollars into the pot, and the optimal-strategy player bets a hundred dollars and his opponent folds, the opponent loses fifty dollars. If he calls, one-third of the time he will win, because the optimal-strategy player is bluffing, and two-thirds of the time he will lose, because the optimal-strategy player is betting a hand that is strong enough to win. The opponent now has no means of knowing when it is better to call than to fold. This is described as making the opponent "indifferent." He might as well flip a coin. "Now it's a mind game," Ferguson said.

"What are the guys who don't play optimal strategy doing?" I asked.

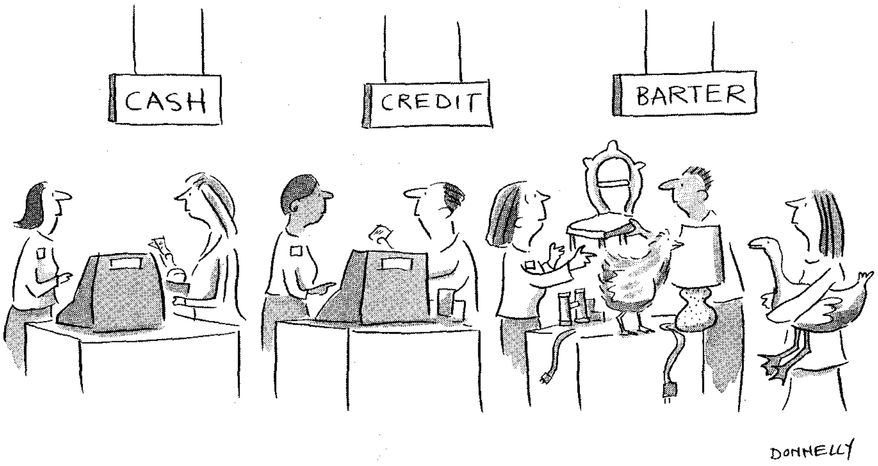
"I'm not sure what they're thinking," Ferguson said. "They're flying by the seat of their pants. I learned poker by sitting at home and thinking how to play hands—if I play my hands this way, what can my opponent do to take advantage of me, and if he can, what do I need to do so that he can't anymore? I want to be the least exploitable player. Other people learn through experience, and if they're good they're going to come up with a strategy that's pretty similar to what I do. It turns out that there's just a right way to play. I learned by applying game theory. They learned through what I consider a more arduous process, playing countless hands. Am I smarter because I use game theory? I don't think so. It's hard to learn poker, because you can play a hand horribly and win, and also play perfectly—almost—and lose. How's the guy who doesn't know the game well going to know the difference?"

Some players think that approaching poker through math causes someone like Ferguson to lose sight of all the peripheral elements of the game, such as "tells," unconsciously revealing behaviors that intuitive players regard as rich in information. Ferguson doesn't dismiss these aspects of the game—he both looks for tells and tries not to display them—but he believes that game theory protects him from making intuitive judgments that might fail, or from being distracted by information that's not necessarily germane. Exploitive players "model their opponents, and then they come up with a strategy that will beat that opponent—'He raised here, he must have that hand' or 'He plays that way, I'm going to play this way'—and they stop there," Ferguson said. "I don't stop there. I say, 'If I play this way, how can he play to counteract what I'm doing—how might he adjust?' The beauty of it is that it doesn't depend on your opponent. Once I figure out what the optimal strategy is, I know it. A year from now, it will be the same. It doesn't matter who I'm playing against. The research is everlasting."

Another player who uses game theory and math as heavily as Ferguson does is Andy Bloch, who is thirty-nine, and has two degrees in electrical engineering from M.I.T. and a law degree from Harvard. "Most other people are trying to outplay you—bluff you out of pots, trying to get a read on you," Bloch told me. "If you're playing against someone like that, you can manipulate them into making bad calls and folds. Chris is one of the most difficult people to get an edge on, if you can get an edge at all. Against other players, I'm going to try, but with Chris I don't even really try. He's too difficult to read. Players unfamiliar with game theory, the intuitive players, are going to have a really hard time reading and understanding him, because some of the plays he makes are going to confuse them. They'll see a bluff and think he bluffs too much, because the bluff doesn't make sense."

At the tail end of the 2008 World Series of Poker, the Bellagio held a tournament, and Ferguson entered, although he was exhausted—he had played in thirty-three of fifty-five events of the series, and had won around seven hundred thousand dollars. The buy-in at the Bellagio was fifteen thousand dollars, cash only. Ferguson paid with three five-thousand-dollar chips that a friend had given him to satisfy a debt. He sat with eight other players at a table in a high-ceilinged room with huge windows at one end, off the casino proper. In all, there were four hundred and forty-six players at forty-five tables. There was a low, sibilant rustle in the room, the sound of chips being agitated in hundreds of hands. On the walls were television screens showing a golf tournament and an action movie, with the sound turned off.

Ferguson calls himself a tournament specialist, meaning that he doesn't play for table stakes—what are known as live games. In live games, players can always buy more chips when they lose. Ferguson regards this as tedious. In a tournament, when you've lost your chips, you're done. A tournament player has to accumulate chips to withstand challenges, which become more consequential as the match progresses. Players are often allowed to enter tournament games a few hours after play has started, which is what he likes to do. "I lose the advantage of knowing the table," he says, meaning



the other players, but, because he has rested, his decisions are better.

Thousands of men and women are believed to play poker for a living. The entry fees at big tournaments can be so high that chairs are sometimes filled by people representing syndicates—groups of players who have pooled their money and sent one player to represent them. If there are winnings, they split them.

Ferguson kept getting cards he didn't want. He turned their edges over slightly to read them, then tossed them back and folded his arms across his chest and looked impassively at the movie. Now and then he leaned back on the legs of his chair. He was roused briefly by a man in a white T-shirt and black shorts, with black shiny hair, who walked mostly sideways among the tables toward the door. "I'm a friggin' idiot," the man said. "That's what I am. Stone-cold idiot."

I stood near Ferguson's table. Julio Rodriguez, who writes for CardPlayer.com, was filing updates on the game. I asked Rodriguez how unusual Ferguson was in being so fluent in math. "A lot of players know the math," he said. "There's no way around it, really, but the majority of them go on instinct, or feel, or a read on a player. It seems like a lot of them are just born with a sense of games. If you talk to a lot of these guys outside, they're never not playing a game. They're reading you. That's why they're so engaging. They know what people want; it's very easy for them to please you. They also know how to deceive."

I asked why he thought Ferguson appeared to be playing so cautiously. This early in the tournament, he said, "everyone's mostly sitting on their hands, waiting for someone to make a mistake. Chris is very stoic. He'll wait as long as he has to. He's watching the other players."

"They're watching him, too?"

Rodriguez pursed his lips and shook his head slightly, as if to say the effort would be pointless. "He's like a robot," he said. "You get nothing."

As it happened, the afternoon went poorly for Ferguson. Almost two hours in, he had lost nearly half his chips. His expression remained flat. He lifted his hat a few times and scratched his head. Three times in a row he was raised out of a pot. Much of the time, his cards had been good enough to get him into the hand but not sufficient to allow him to stay. He called a ten-thousand-dollar bet and lost. Finally, he shoved all his chips toward the center of the table, showed his cards, and was out. He shook hands with the other players and wished them well, reminding me of something his father had said: "One of the nice things about Chris growing up and playing games is he didn't mind losing. Most kids I play with are scared of losing. He knows that losing, you learn something." I asked Chris if losing bothered him, and he said it only really upset him if he lost as the result of a mistake. Anyway, he said, thinking you would win all the time at poker was unrealistic.

Ferguson and I went to dinner at a Mexican restaurant at the Palms. The restaurant didn't have a table ready. The hostess gave us a beeper, so that we could wander around the casino. Ferguson was tired and wanted to sit down. The first chair we found was in front of a row of video poker machines. I put a dollar in the machine.

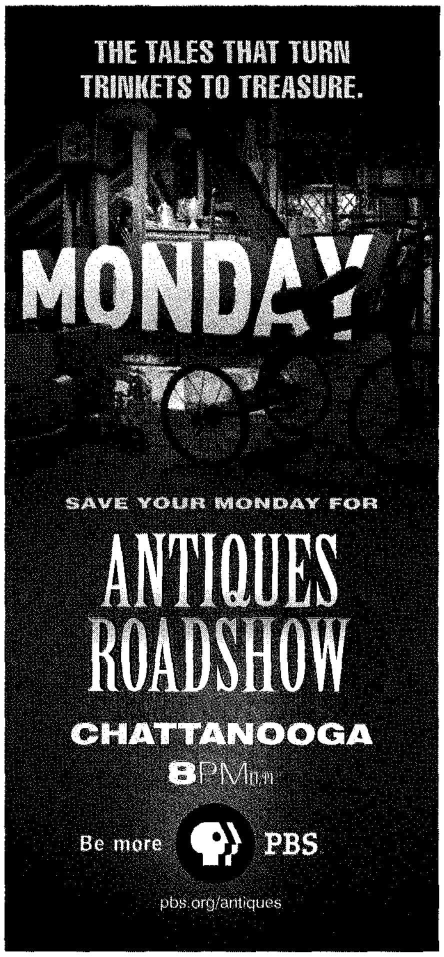
"This is something I never do," Ferguson said. The machine offered several games. "The only one I know the optimal strategy for is Jacks or Better."

"Play that," I said.

"They don't have it," he said. He chose one called Super Double Double, the closest he could find to Jacks or Better, and five cards appeared on the screen. He played quickly, hitting a button to hold or to draw cards.

A pair of tens arrived. "This is a really bad hand," he said, and drew three more cards, none of which improved it. He talked as he played. "I'm trying to figure out whether to hold ace-queen, to the two fours, because the payout is different," he said. And, "Here's what I'm thinking: pair of queens and the sevens. I'm throwing away the sevens—I don't think there's any question about it." And, "What's the payoff to me if I just held the kings? There's a chance I get another king about one-eighth of the time. There's a chance I get four kings; I'm guessing that's an additional eighth unit toward the payout—I'm up to three-eighths. I need to get up to a half."

The red light on our beeper began flashing. Two nines appeared. Ferguson discarded the three other cards, and in the draw he got two more nines. At the cashier's cage, I collected fourteen dollars and applied it to the dinner. ◆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HELLHOLE

The United States holds tens of thousands of inmates in long-term solitary confinement. Is this torture?

BY ATUL GAWANDE

Human beings are social creatures. We are social not just in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we each depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people.

Children provide the clearest demonstration of this fact, although it was slow to be accepted. Well into the nineteen-fifties, psychologists were encouraging parents to give children *less* attention and affection, in order to encourage independence. Then Harry Harlow, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, produced a series of influential studies involving baby rhesus monkeys.

He happened upon the findings in the mid-fifties, when he decided to save money for his primate-research laboratory by breeding his own lab monkeys instead of importing them from India. Because he didn't know how to raise infant monkeys, he cared for them the way hospitals of the era cared for human infants—in nurseries, with plenty of food, warm blankets, some toys, and in isolation from other infants to prevent the spread of infection. The monkeys grew up sturdy, disease-free, and larger than those from the wild. Yet they were also profoundly disturbed, given to staring blankly and rocking in place for long periods, circling their cages repetitively, and mutilating themselves.

At first, Harlow and his graduate students couldn't figure out what the problem was. They considered factors such as diet, patterns of light exposure, even the antibiotics they used. Then, as Deborah Blum recounts in a fascinating biography of Harlow, "Love at Goon Park," one of his researchers noticed how tightly the monkeys clung to their soft blankets. Harlow wondered whether what the monkeys were missing in their Isolettes was a mother. So, in an odd experiment, he gave them an artificial one.

In the studies, one artificial mother was a doll made of terry cloth; the other was made of wire. He placed a warming device inside the dolls to make them seem more comforting. The babies, Harlow discovered, largely ignored the wire mother. But they became deeply attached to the cloth mother. They caressed it. They slept curled up on it. They ran to it when frightened. They refused replacements: they wanted only "their" mother. If sharp spikes were made to randomly thrust out of the mother's body when the rhesus babies held it, they waited patiently for the spikes to recede and returned to clutching it. No matter how tightly they clung to the surrogate mothers, however, the monkeys remained psychologically abnormal.

In a later study on the effect of total isolation from birth, the researchers found that the test monkeys, upon being released into a group of ordinary monkeys, "usually go into a state of emotional shock, characterized by . . . autistic self-clutching and rocking." Harlow noted, "One of six monkeys isolated for three months refused to eat after release and died five days later." After several weeks in the company of other monkeys, most of them adjusted—but not those who had been isolated for longer periods. "Twelve months of isolation almost obliterated the animals socially," Harlow wrote. They became permanently withdrawn, and they lived as outcasts—regularly set upon, as if inviting abuse.

The research made Harlow famous (and infamous, too—revulsion at his work helped spur the animal-rights movement). Other psychologists produced evidence of similarly deep and sustained damage in neglected and orphaned children. Hospitals were made to open up their nurseries to parents. And it became widely accepted that children require nurturing human beings not just for food and protection but also for the normal functioning of their brains.

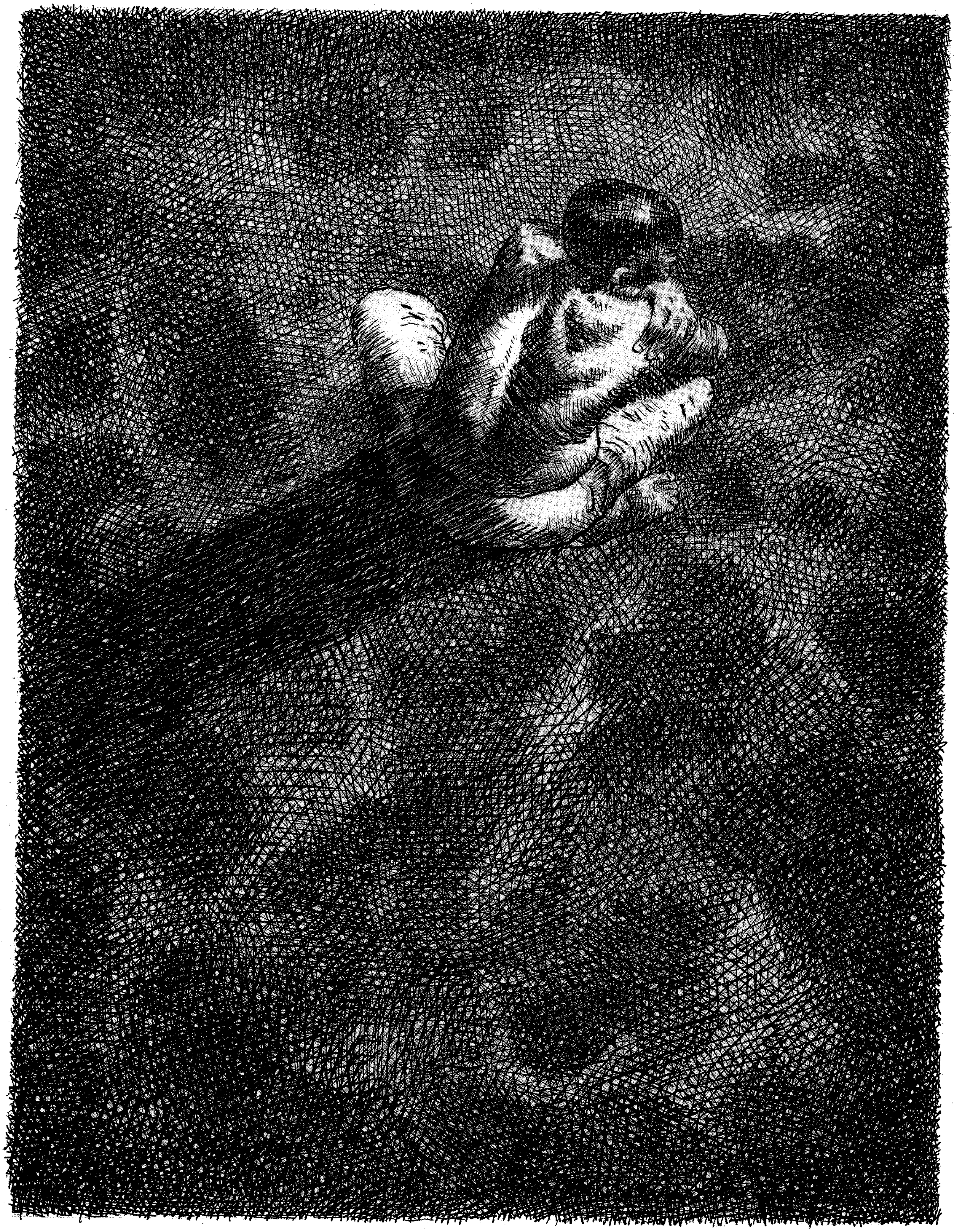
We have been hesitant to apply these lessons to adults. Adults, after all, are fully formed, independent beings, with internal strengths and knowledge to draw upon. We wouldn't have anything like a child's dependence on other people, right? Yet it seems that we do. We don't have a lot of monkey experiments to call upon here. But mankind has produced tens of thousands of human ones, including in our prison system. And the picture that has emerged is profoundly unsettling.

Among our most benign experiments are those with people who voluntarily isolate themselves for extended periods. Long-distance solo sailors, for instance, commit themselves to months at sea. They face all manner of physical terrors: thrashing storms, fifty-foot waves, leaks, illness. Yet, for many, the single most overwhelming difficulty they report is the "soul-destroying loneliness," as one sailor called it. Astronauts have to be screened for their ability to tolerate long stretches in tightly confined isolation, and they come to depend on radio and video communications for social contact.

The problem of isolation goes beyond ordinary loneliness, however. Consider what we've learned from hostages who have been held in solitary confinement—from the journalist Terry Anderson, for example, whose extraordinary memoir, "Den of Lions," recounts his seven years as a hostage of Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Anderson was the chief Middle East correspondent for the Associated Press when, on March 16, 1985, three bearded men forced him from his car in Beirut at gunpoint. He was pushed into a Mercedes sedan, covered head to toe with a heavy blanket, and made to crouch head down in the footwell behind the front seat. His captors drove him to a garage, pulled him out of the car, put a hood over his head, and bound his wrists and ankles

BRAD HOLLAND



P.O.W.s have reported that the simple experience of isolation is as much of an ordeal as any physical abuse they have suffered.

with tape. For half an hour, they grilled him for the names of other Americans in Beirut, but he gave no names and they did not beat him or press him further. They threw him in the trunk of the car, drove him to another building, and put him in what would be the first of a succession of cells across Lebanon. He was soon placed in what seemed to be a dusty closet, large enough for only a mattress. Blindfolded, he could make out the distant sounds of other hostages. (One was William Buckley, the C.I.A. station chief who was kidnapped and tortured repeatedly until he weakened and died.) Peering around his blindfold, Anderson could see a bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling. He received three unpalatable meals a day—usually a sandwich of bread and cheese, or cold rice with canned vegetables, or soup. He had a bottle to urinate in and was allotted one five- to ten-minute trip each day to a rotting bathroom to empty his bowels and wash with water at a dirty sink. Otherwise, the only reprieve from isolation came when the guards made short visits to bark at him for breaking a rule or to threaten him, sometimes with a gun at his temple.

He missed people terribly, especially his fiancée and his family. He was despondent and depressed. Then, with time, he began to feel something more. He felt himself disintegrating. It was as if his brain were grinding down. A month into his confinement, he recalled in his memoir, "The mind is a blank. Jesus, I always thought I was smart. Where are all the things I learned, the books I read, the poems I memorized? There's nothing there, just a formless, gray-black misery. My mind's gone dead. God, help me."

He was stiff from lying in bed day and night, yet tired all the time. He dozed off and on constantly, sleeping twelve hours a day. He craved activity of almost any kind. He would watch the daylight wax and wane on the ceiling, or roaches creep slowly up the wall. He had a Bible and tried to read, but he often found that he lacked the concentration to do so. He observed himself becoming neurotically possessive about his little space, at times putting his life in jeopardy by flying into a rage if a guard happened to step on his bed. He brooded incessantly, thinking back on all the mistakes he'd made in life, his regrets, his offenses against God and family.

His captors moved him every few months. For unpredictable stretches of time, he was granted the salvation of a companion—sometimes he shared a cell with as many as four other hostages—and he noticed that his thinking recovered rapidly when this occurred. He could read and concentrate longer, avoid hallucinations, and better control his emotions. "I would rather have had the worst companion than no companion at all," he noted.

"Jim, say hi to Tom, our severance consultant."

In September, 1986, after several months of sharing a cell with another hostage, Anderson was, for no apparent reason, returned to solitary confinement, this time in a six-by-six-foot cell, with no windows, and light from only a flickering fluorescent lamp in an outside corridor. The guards refused to say how long he would be there. After a few weeks, he felt his mind slipping away again.

"I find myself trembling sometimes for no reason," he wrote. "I'm afraid I'm beginning to lose my mind, to lose control completely."

One day, three years into his ordeal, he snapped. He walked over to a wall and began beating his forehead against it, dozens of times. His head was smashed and bleeding before the guards were able to stop him.

Some hostages fared worse. Anderson told the story of Frank Reed, a fifty-four-year-old American private-school director who was taken hostage and held in solitary confinement for four months before being put in with Anderson. By then, Reed had become severely withdrawn. He lay motionless for hours facing a wall, semi-catatonic. He could not follow the guards' simplest instructions. This invited abuse from them, in much the same way that once isolated rhesus monkeys seemed to invite abuse from the colony. Released after three and a half years, Reed ultimately required admission to a psychiatric hospital.

"It's an awful thing, solitary," John McCain wrote of his five and a half years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam—more than two years of it spent in isolation in a fifteen-by-fifteen-foot cell, unable to communicate with other P.O.W.s except by tap code, secreted notes, or by speaking into an enamel cup pressed against the wall. "It crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment." And this comes from a man who was beaten regularly; denied adequate medical treatment for two broken arms, a broken leg, and chronic dysentery; and tortured to the point of having an arm broken again. A U.S. military study of almost a hundred and fifty naval aviators returned from imprisonment in Vietnam, many of whom were treated even worse than McCain, reported that they found social isolation to be as torturous and agonizing as any physical abuse they suffered.

And what happened to them *was* physical. EEG studies going back to the nineteen-sixties have shown diffuse slowing of brain waves in prisoners after a week or more of solitary confinement. In 1992, fifty-seven prisoners of war, released after an average of six months in detention camps in the former Yugoslavia, were examined using EEG-like tests. The recordings revealed brain abnormalities months afterward; the most severe were found in prisoners who had endured either head trauma sufficient to render them unconscious or, yes, solitary confinement. Without sustained social interaction, the human brain may become as impaired as one that has incurred a traumatic injury.

On December 4, 1991, Terry Anderson was released from captivity. He had been the last and the longest-held American hostage in Lebanon. I spoke to Keron Fletcher, a former British military psychiatrist who had been on the receiving team for Anderson and many other hostages, and followed them for years afterward. Initially, Fletcher said, everyone experiences the pure elation of being able to see and talk to people again, especially family and friends. They can't get enough of other people, and talk almost nonstop for hours. They are optimistic and hopeful. But, afterward, normal sleeping and eating patterns prove difficult to reëstablish. Some have lost their sense of time. For weeks, they have trouble managing the sensations and emotional complexities of their freedom.

For the first few months after his release, Anderson said when I reached him by phone recently, "it was just kind of a fog." He had done many television interviews at the time. "And if you look at me in the pictures? Look at my eyes. You can tell. I look drugged."

Most hostages survived their ordeal, Fletcher said, although relationships, marriages, and careers were often lost. Some found, as John McCain did, that the experience even strengthened them. Yet none saw solitary confinement as anything less than torture. This presents us with an awkward question: If prolonged isolation is—as research and experience have confirmed for decades—so objectively horrifying, so intrinsically cruel, how did we end up with a prison system that may subject more of our own citizens to it than any other country in history has?

Recently, I met a man who had spent more than five years in isolation at a prison in the Boston suburb of Walpole, Massachusetts, not far from my home. Bobby Dellelo was, to say the least, no Terry Anderson or John McCain. Brought up in the run-down neighborhoods of Boston's West End, in the nineteen-forties, he was caught burglarizing a shoe store at the age of ten. At thirteen, he recalls, he was nabbed while robbing a Jordan Marsh department store. (He and his friends learned to hide out in stores at closing time, steal their merchandise, and then break out during the night.) The remainder of his childhood was spent mostly in the state reform school. That was where he learned how to fight, how to hot-wire a car with a piece of foil, how to pick locks, and how to make a zip gun using a snapped-off automobile radio antenna, which, in those days, was just thick enough to barrel a .22-calibre bullet. Released upon turning eighteen, Dellelo returned to stealing. Usually, he stole from office buildings at night. But some of the people he hung out with did stickups, and, together with one of them, he held up a liquor store in Dorchester.

"What a disaster that thing was," he recalls, laughing. They put the store's owner and the customers in a walk-in refrigerator at gunpoint, took their wallets, and went to rob the register. But more customers came in. So they robbed them and put them in the refrigerator, too. Then still more customers arrived, the refrigerator got full, and the whole thing turned into a circus. Dellelo and his partner finally escaped. But one of the customers identified him to the police. By the time he was caught, Dellelo had been fingered for robbing the Commander Hotel in Cambridge as well. He served a year for the first conviction and two and a half years for the second.

Three months after his release, in 1963, at the age of twenty, he and a friend tried to rob the Kopelman jewelry store, in downtown Boston. But an alarm went off before they got their hands on anything. They separated and ran. The friend shot and killed an off-duty policeman while trying to escape, then killed himself. Dellelo was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life in prison. He ended up serving forty years. Five years and one month were spent in isolation.

The criteria for the isolation of prisoners vary by state but typically include not only violent infractions but also violation of prison rules or association with gang members. The imposition of long-term isolation—which can be for months or years—is ultimately at the discretion of prison administrators. One former prisoner I spoke to, for example, recalled being put in solitary confinement for petty annoyances like refusing to get out of the shower quickly enough. Bobby Dellelo was put there for escaping.

It was an elaborate scheme. He had a partner, who picked the lock to a supervisor's office and got hold of the information manual for the microwave-detection system that patrolled a grassy no man's land between the prison and the road. They studied the manual long enough to learn how to circumvent the system and returned it. On Halloween Sunday, 1993, they had friends stage a fight in the prison yard. With all the guards in the towers looking at the fight through binoculars, the two men tipped a picnic table up against a twelve-foot wall and climbed it like a ladder. Beyond it, they scaled a sixteen-foot fence. To get over the razor wire on top, they used a Z-shaped tool they'd improvised from locker handles. They dropped down into the no man's land and followed an invisible path that they'd calculated the microwave system would not detect. No alarm sounded. They went over one more fence, walked around a parking lot, picked their way through some woods, and emerged onto a four-lane road. After a short walk to a convenience store, they called a taxi from a telephone booth and rolled away before anyone knew they were gone.

They lasted twenty-four days on the outside. Eventually, somebody ratted them out, and the police captured them on the day before Thanksgiving, at the house of a friend in Cambridge. The prison administration gave Dellelo five years in the Departmental Disciplinary Unit of the Walpole prison, its hundred-and-twenty-four-cell super-maximum segregation unit.

Wearing ankle bracelets, handcuffs,

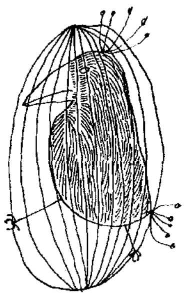
and a belly chain, Dellelo was marched into a thirteen-by-eight-foot off-white cell. A four-inch-thick concrete bed slab jutted out from the wall opposite the door. A smaller slab protruding from a side wall provided a desk. A cylindrical concrete block in the floor served as a seat. On the remaining wall was a toilet and a metal sink. He was given four sheets, four towels, a blanket, a bedroll, a toothbrush, toilet paper, a tall clear plastic cup, a bar of soap, seven white T-shirts, seven pairs of boxer shorts, seven pairs of socks, plastic slippers, a pad of paper, and a ballpoint pen. A speaker with a microphone was mounted on the door. Cells used for solitary confinement are often windowless, but this one had a ribbonlike window that was seven inches wide and five feet tall. The electrically controlled door was solid steel, with a seven-inch-by-twenty-eight-inch aperture and two wickets—little door slots, one at ankle height and one at waist height, for shackling him whenever he was let out and for passing him meal trays.

As in other supermaxes—facilities designed to isolate prisoners from social contact—Dellelo was confined to his cell for at least twenty-three hours a day and permitted out only for a shower or for recreation in an outdoor cage that he estimated to be fifty feet long and five feet wide, known as "the dog kennel." He could talk to other prisoners through the steel door of his cell, and during recreation if a prisoner was in an adjacent cage. He made a kind of fishing line for passing notes to adjacent cells by unwinding the elastic from his boxer shorts, though it was contraband and would be confiscated. Prisoners could receive mail and as many as ten reading items. They were allowed one phone call the first month and could earn up to four calls and four visits per month if they followed the rules, but there could be no physical contact with anyone, except when guards forcibly restrained them. Some supermaxes even use food as punishment, serving the prisoners nutraloaf, an unpalatable food brick that contains just enough nutrition for survival. Dellelo was spared this. The rules also permitted him to have a radio after thirty days, and, after sixty days, a thirteen-inch black-and-white television.

"This is going to be a piece of cake," Dellelo recalls thinking when the door closed behind him. Whereas many American supermax prisoners—and most P.O.W.s and hostages—have no idea when they might get out, he knew exactly how long he was going to be there. He drew a calendar on his pad of paper to start counting down the days. He would get a radio and a TV. He could read. No one was going to bother him. And, as his elaborate escape plan showed, he could be patient. "This is their sophisticated security?" he said to himself. "They don't know what they're doing."

After a few months without regular social contact, however, his experience proved no different from that of the P.O.W.s or hostages, or the majority of isolated prisoners whom researchers have studied: he started to lose his mind. He talked to himself. He paced back and forth compulsively, shuffling along the same six-foot path for hours on end. Soon, he was having panic attacks, screaming for help. He hallucinated that the colors on the walls were changing. He became enraged by routine noises—the sound of doors opening as the guards made their hourly checks, the sounds of inmates in nearby cells. After a year or so, he was hearing voices on the television talking directly to him. He put the television under his bed, and rarely took it out again.

One of the paradoxes of solitary confinement is that, as starved as people become for companionship, the experience typically leaves them unfit for social interaction. Once, Dellelo was allowed to have an in-person meeting with his lawyer, and he simply couldn't handle it. After so many months in which his primary human contact had been an occasional phone call or brief conversations with an inmate down the tier, shouted through steel doors at the top of their lungs, he found himself unable to carry on a face-to-face conversation. He had trouble following both words and hand gestures and couldn't generate them himself. When he realized this, he succumbed to a full-blown panic attack.



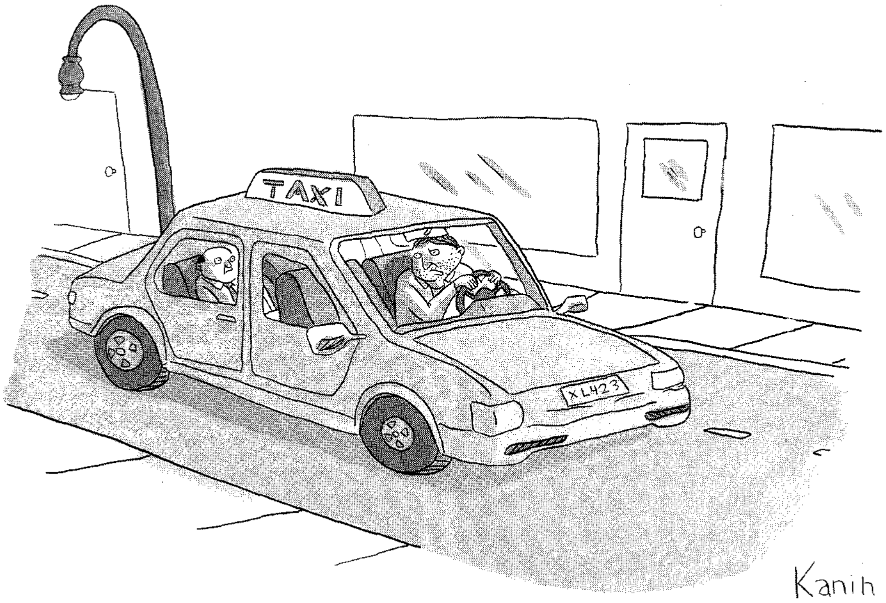
Craig Haney, a psychology professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz, received rare permission to study a hundred randomly selected inmates at California's Pelican Bay supermax, and noted a number of phenomena. First, after months or years of complete isolation, many prisoners "begin to lose the ability to initiate behavior of any kind—to organize their own lives around activity and purpose," he writes. "Chronic apathy, lethargy, depression, and despair often result. . . . In extreme cases, prisoners may literally stop behaving," becoming essentially catatonic.

Second, almost ninety per cent of these prisoners had difficulties with "irrational anger," compared with just three per cent of prisoners in the general population. Haney attributed this to the extreme restriction, the totality of control, and the extended absence of any opportunity for happiness or joy. Many prisoners in solitary become consumed with revenge fantasies.

"There were some guards in D.D.U. who were decent guys," Dellelo told me. They didn't trash his room when he was let out for a shower, or try to trip him when escorting him in chains, or write him up for contraband if he kept food or a salt packet from a meal in his cell. "But some of them were evil, evil pricks." One correctional officer became a particular obsession. Dellelo spent hours imagining cutting his head off and rolling it down the tier. "I mean, I know this is insane thinking," he says now. Even at the time, he added, "I had a fear in the background—like how much of this am I going to be able to let go? How much is this going to affect who I am?"

He was right to worry. Everyone's identity is socially created: it's through your relationships that you understand yourself as a mother or a father, a teacher or an accountant, a hero or a villain. But, after years of isolation, many prisoners change in another way that Haney observed. They begin to see themselves primarily as combatants in the world, people whose identity is rooted in thwarting prison control.

As a matter of self-preservation, this may not be a bad thing. According to the Navy P.O.W. researchers, the instinct to fight back against the enemy constituted the most important coping mechanism for the prisoners they studied. Resistance was often their sole means of maintaining a sense of purpose, and so their sanity. Yet resistance is precisely what we wish to destroy in our supermax prisoners. As Haney observed in a review of research findings, prisoners in solitary confinement must be able to withstand the experience in order to be allowed to return to the highly social world of mainline prison or free society. Perversely, then, the prisoners who can't handle profound isolation are the ones who are forced to remain in it. "And those who have adapted," Haney writes, "are prime candidates for release to a social world to which they may be incapable of ever fully readjusting."



"In my country I was a taxi dispatcher."

• •

Dellelo eventually found a way to resist that would not prolong his ordeal. He fought his battle through the courts, filing motion after motion in an effort to get his conviction overturned. He became so good at submitting his claims that he obtained a paralegal certificate along the way. And, after forty years in prison, and more than five years in solitary, he got his first-degree-homicide conviction reduced to manslaughter. On November 19, 2003, he was freed.

Bobby Dellelo is sixty-seven years old now. He lives on Social Security in a Cambridge efficiency apartment that is about four times larger than his cell. He still seems to be adjusting to the world outside. He lives alone. To the extent that he is out in society, it is, in large measure, as a combatant. He works for prisoners' rights at the American Friends Service Committee. He also does occasional work assisting prisoners with their legal cases. Sitting at his kitchen table, he showed me how to pick a padlock—you know, just in case I ever find myself in trouble.

But it was impossible to talk to him about his time in isolation without seeing that it was fundamentally no different from the isolation that Terry Anderson and John McCain had endured. Whether in Walpole or Beirut or Hanoi, all human beings experience isolation as torture.

The main argument for using long-term isolation in prisons is that it provides discipline and prevents violence. When inmates refuse to follow the rules—when they escape, deal drugs, or attack other inmates and corrections officers—wardens must be able to punish and contain the misconduct. Presumably, less stringent measures haven't worked, or the behavior would not have occurred. And it's legitimate to incapacitate violent aggressors for the safety of others. So, advocates say, isolation is a necessary evil, and those who don't recognize this are dangerously naïve.

The argument makes intuitive sense. If the worst of the worst are removed from the general prison population and put in isolation, you'd expect there to be markedly fewer inmate shankings and attacks on corrections officers. But the evidence doesn't bear this out. Perhaps the most careful inquiry into whether supermax prisons decrease violence and disorder was a 2003 analysis examining the experience in three states—Arizona, Illinois, and Minnesota—following the opening of their supermax prisons. The study found that levels of inmate-on-inmate violence were unchanged, and that levels of inmate-on-staff violence changed unpredictably, rising in Arizona, falling in Illinois, and holding steady in Minnesota.

Prison violence, it turns out, is not simply an issue of a few belligerents. In the past thirty years, the United States has quadrupled its incarceration rate but not its prison space. Work and education programs have been cancelled, out of a belief that the pursuit of rehabilitation is pointless. The result has been unprecedented overcrowding, along with unprecedented idleness—a nice formula for violence. Remove a few prisoners to solitary confinement, and the violence doesn't change. So you remove some more, and still nothing happens. Before long, you find yourself in the position we are in today. The United States now has five per cent of the world's population, twenty-five per cent of its prisoners, and probably the vast majority of prisoners who are in long-term solitary confinement.

It wasn't always like this. The wide-scale use of isolation is, almost exclusively, a phenomenon of the past twenty years. In 1890, the United States Supreme Court came close to declaring the punishment to be unconstitutional. Writing for the majority in the case of a Colorado murderer who had been held in isolation for a month, Justice Samuel Miller noted that experience had revealed "serious objections" to solitary confinement:

> A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others, still, committed suicide; while those who stood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community.

Prolonged isolation was used sparingly, if at all, by most American prisons for almost a century. Our first supermax—our first institution specifically designed for mass solitary confinement—

was not established until 1983, in Marion, Illinois. In 1995, a federal court reviewing California's first supermax admitted that the conditions "hover on the edge of what is humanly tolerable for those with normal resilience." But it did not rule them to be unconstitutionally cruel or unusual, except in cases of mental illness. The prison's supermax conditions, the court stated, did not pose "a sufficiently high risk to all inmates of incurring a serious mental illness." In other words, there could be no legal objection to its routine use, given that the isolation didn't make *everyone* crazy. The ruling seemed to fit the public mood. By the end of the nineteen-nineties, some sixty supermax institutions had opened across the country. And new solitary-confinement units were established within nearly all of our ordinary maximum-security prisons.

The number of prisoners in these facilities has since risen to extraordinary levels. America now holds at least twenty-five thousand inmates in isolation in supermax prisons. An additional fifty to eighty thousand are kept in restrictive segregation units, many of them in isolation, too, although the government does not release these figures. By 1999, the practice had grown to the point that Arizona, Colorado, Maine, Nebraska, Nevada, Rhode Island, and Virginia kept between five and eight per cent of their prison population in isolation, and, by 2003, New York had joined them as well. Mississippi alone held eighteen hundred prisoners in supermax—twelve per cent of its prisoners over all. At the same time, other states had just a tiny fraction of their inmates in solitary confinement. In 1999, for example, Indiana had eighty-five supermax beds; Georgia had only ten. Neither of these two states can be described as being soft on crime.

Advocates of solitary confinement are left with a single argument for subjecting thousands of people to years of isolation: What else are we supposed to do? How else are we to deal with the violent, the disruptive, the prisoners who are just too dangerous to be housed with others?

As it happens, only a subset of prisoners currently locked away for long periods of isolation would be considered truly dangerous. Many are escapees or suspected gang members; many others are in solitary for nonviolent breaches of prison rules. Still, there are some highly dangerous and violent prisoners who pose a serious challenge to prison discipline and safety. In August, I met a man named Robert Felton, who had spent fourteen and a half years in isolation in the Illinois state correctional system. He is now thirty-six years old. He grew up in the predominantly black housing projects of Danville, Illinois, and had been a force of mayhem from the time he was a child.

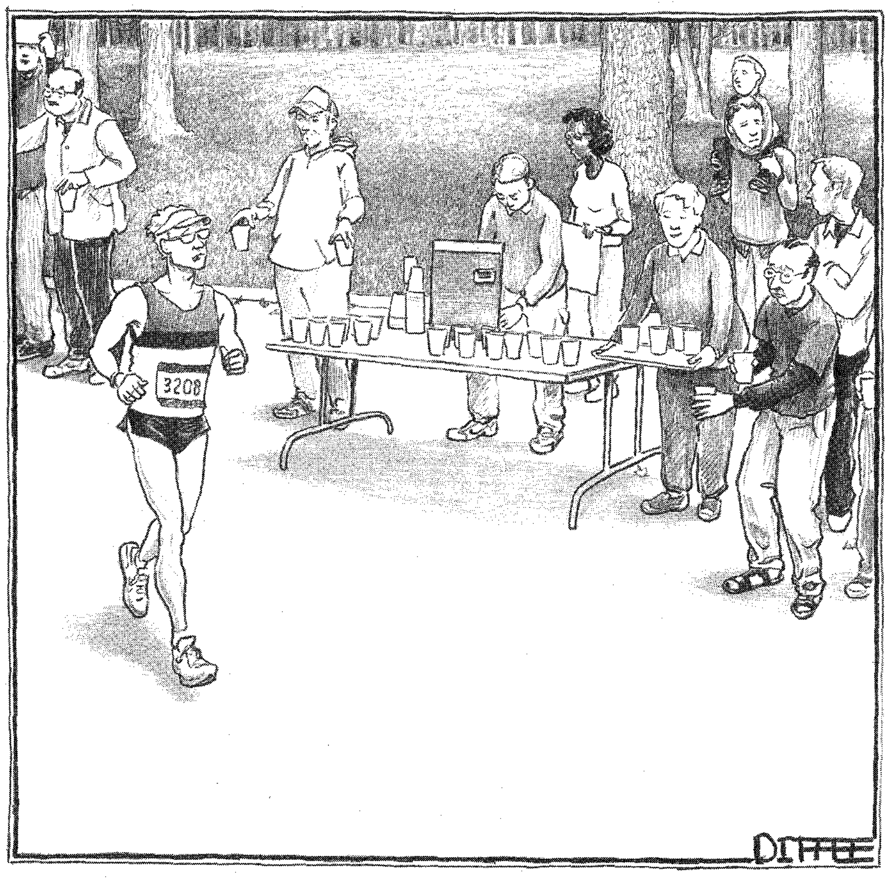
His crimes were mainly impulsive, rather than planned. The first time he was arrested was at the age of eleven, when he and a relative broke into a house to steal some Atari video games. A year later, he was sent to state reform school after he and a friend broke into an abandoned building and made off with paint cans, irons, and other property that they hardly knew what to do with. In reform school, he got into fights and screamed obscenities at the staff. When the staff tried to discipline him by taking away his recreation or his television privileges, his behavior worsened. He tore a pillar out of the ceiling, a sink and mirrors off the wall, doors off their hinges. He was put in a special cell, stripped of nearly everything. When he began attacking counsellors, the authorities transferred him to the maximum-security juvenile facility at Joliet, where he continued to misbehave.

Felton wasn't a sociopath. He made friends easily. He was close to his family, and missed them deeply. He took no pleasure in hurting others. Psychiatric evaluations turned up little more than attention-deficit disorder. But he had a terrible temper, a tendency to escalate rather than to defuse confrontations, and, by the time he was released, just before turning eighteen, he had achieved only a ninth-grade education.

Within months of returning home, he was arrested again. He had walked into a Danville sports bar and ordered a beer. The barman took his ten-dollar bill.

"Then he says, 'Naw, man, you can't get no beer. You're underage,' " Felton recounts. "I says, 'Well, give me my ten dollars back.' He says, 'You ain't getting shit. Get the hell out of here.' "

Felton stood his ground. The bartender had a pocket knife on the counter. "And, when he went for it, I went for



"Thanks, but what I really need is some bigger shorts."

it," Felton told me. "When I grabbed the knife first, I turned around and spinned on him. I said, 'You think you're gonna cut me, man? You gotta be fucked up.' "

The barman had put the ten-dollar bill in a Royal Crown bag behind the counter. Felton grabbed the bag and ran out the back door. He forgot his car keys on the counter, though. So he went back to get the keys—"the stupid keys," he now says ruefully—and in the fight that ensued he left the barman severely injured and bleeding. The police caught Felton fleeing in his car. He was convicted of armed robbery, aggravated unlawful restraint, and aggravated battery, and served fifteen years in prison.

He was eventually sent to the Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum-security facility in Joliet. Inside the overflowing prison, he got into vicious fights over insults and the like. About three months into his term, during a shakedown following the murder of an inmate, prison officials turned up a makeshift knife in his cell. (He denies that it was his.) They gave him a year in isolation. He was a danger, and he had to be taught a lesson. But it was a lesson that he seemed incapable of learning.

Felton's Stateville isolation cell had gray walls, a solid steel door, no window, no clock, and a light that was kept on twenty-four hours a day. As soon as he was shut in, he became claustrophobic and had a panic attack. Like Dellelo, Anderson, and McCain, he was soon pacing back and forth, talking to himself, studying the insects crawling around his cell, reliving past events from childhood, sleeping for as much as sixteen hours a day. But, unlike them, he lacked the inner resources to cope with his situation.

Many prisoners find survival in physical exercise, prayer, or plans for escape. Many carry out elaborate mental exercises, building entire houses in their heads, board by board, nail by nail, from the ground up, or memorizing team rosters for a baseball season. McCain recreated in his mind movies he'd seen. Anderson reconstructed complete novels from memory. Yuri Nosenko, a K.G.B. defector whom the C.I.A. wrongly accused of being a double agent and held for three years in total isolation (no reading material, no news, no human contact except with interrogators) in a closet-size concrete cell near Williamsburg, Virginia, made chess sets from threads and a calendar from lint (only to have them discovered and swept away).

But Felton would just yell, "Guard! Guard! Guard! Guard! Guard!," or bang his cup on the toilet, for hours. He could spend whole days hallucinating that he was in another world, that he was a child at home in Danville, playing in the streets, having conversations with imaginary people. Small cruelties that others somehow bore in quiet fury—getting no meal tray, for example—sent him into a rage. Despite being restrained with handcuffs, ankle shackles, and a belly chain whenever he was taken out, he managed to assault the staff at least three times. He threw his food through the door slot. He set his cell on fire by tearing his mattress apart, wrapping the stuffing in a sheet, popping his light bulb, and using the exposed wires to set the whole thing ablaze. He did this so many times that the walls of his cell were black with soot.

After each offense, prison officials extended his sentence in isolation. Still, he wouldn't stop. He began flooding his cell, by stuffing the door crack with socks, plugging the toilet, and flushing until the water was a couple of feet deep. Then he'd pull out the socks and the whole wing would flood with wastewater.

"Flooding the cell was the last option for me," Felton told me. "It was when I had nothing else I could do. You know, they took everything out of my cell, and all I had left was toilet water. I'd sit there and I'd say, 'Well, let me see what I can do with this toilet water.' "

Felton was not allowed out again for fourteen and a half years. He spent almost his entire prison term, from 1990 to 2005, in isolation. In March, 1998, he was among the first inmates to be moved to Tamms, a new, high-tech supermax facility in southern Illinois.

"At Tamms, man, it was like a lab," he says. Contact even with guards was tightly reduced. Cutoff valves meant that he couldn't flood his cell. He had little ability to force a response—negative or positive—from a human being. And, with that gone, he began to deteriorate further. He ceased showering, changing his clothes, brushing his teeth. His teeth rotted and ten had to be pulled. He began throwing his feces around his cell. He became psychotic.

It is unclear how many prisoners in solitary confinement become psychotic. Stuart Grassian, a Boston psychiatrist, has interviewed more than two hundred prisoners in solitary confinement. In one in-depth study, prepared for a legal challenge of prisoner-isolation practices, he concluded that about a third developed acute psychosis with hallucinations. The markers of vulnerability that he observed in his interviews were signs of cognitive dysfunction—a history of seizures, serious mental illness, mental retardation, illiteracy, or, as in Felton's case, a diagnosis such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, signalling difficulty with impulse control. In the prisoners Grassian saw, about a third had these vulnerabilities, and these were the prisoners whom solitary confinement had made psychotic. They were simply not cognitively equipped to endure it without mental breakdowns.

A psychiatrist tried giving Felton anti-psychotic medication. Mostly, it made him sleep—sometimes twenty-four hours at a stretch, he said. Twice he attempted suicide. The first time, he hanged himself in a noose made from a sheet. The second time, he took a single staple from a legal newspaper and managed to slash the radial artery in his left wrist with it. In both instances, he was taken to a local emergency room for a few hours, patched up, and sent back to prison.

Is there an alternative? Consider what other countries do. Britain, for example, has had its share of serial killers, homicidal rapists, and prisoners who have taken hostages and repeatedly assaulted staff. The British also fought a seemingly unending war in Northern Ireland, which brought them hundreds of Irish Republican Army prisoners committed to violent resistance. The authorities resorted to a harshly punitive approach to control, including, in the mid-seventies, extensive use of solitary confinement. But the violence in prisons remained unchanged, the costs were phenomenal (in the United States, they reach more than fifty thousand dollars a year per inmate), and the public outcry became intolerable. British authorities therefore looked for another approach.

Beginning in the nineteen-eighties, they gradually adopted a strategy that focussed on preventing prison violence rather than on delivering an ever more brutal series of punishments for it. The approach starts with the simple observation that prisoners who are unmanageable in one setting often behave perfectly reasonably in another. This suggested that violence might, to a critical extent, be a function of the conditions of incarceration. The British noticed that problem prisoners were usually people for whom avoiding humiliation and saving face were fundamental and instinctive. When conditions maximized humiliation and confrontation, every interaction escalated into a trial of strength. Violence became a predictable consequence.

So the British decided to give their most dangerous prisoners more control, rather than less. They reduced isolation and offered them opportunities for work, education, and special programming to increase social ties and skills. The prisoners were housed in small, stable units of fewer than ten people in individual cells, to avoid conditions of social chaos and unpredictability. In these reformed "Close Supervision Centres," prisoners could receive mental-health treatment and earn rights for more exercise, more phone calls, "contact visits," and even access to cooking facilities. They were allowed to air grievances. And the government set up an independent body of inspectors to track the results and enable adjustments based on the data.

The results have been impressive. The use of long-term isolation in England is now negligible. In all of England, there are now fewer prisoners in "extreme custody" than there are in the state of Maine. And the other countries of Europe have, with a similar focus on small units and violence prevention, achieved a similar outcome.

In this country, in June of 2006, a bipartisan national task force, the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons, released its recommendations after a yearlong investigation. It called for ending long-term isolation of prisoners. Beyond about ten days, the report noted, practically no benefits can be found and the harm is clear—not just for inmates but for the public as well. Most prisoners in long-term isolation are returned to society, after all. And evidence from a number of studies has shown that supermax conditions—in which prisoners have virtually no social interactions and are given no programmatic support—make it highly likely that they will commit more crimes when they are released. Instead, the report said, we should follow the preventive approaches used in European countries.

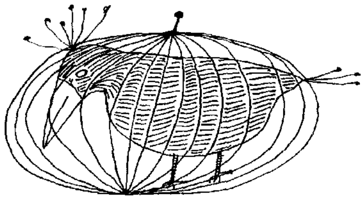
The recommendations went nowhere, of course. Whatever the evidence in its favor, people simply did not believe in the treatment.

I spoke to a state-prison commissioner who wished to remain unidentified. He was a veteran of the system, having been either a prison warden or a commissioner in several states across the country for more than twenty years. He has publicly defended the use of long-term isolation everywhere that he has worked. Nonetheless, he said, he would remove most prisoners from long-term isolation units if he could and provide programming for the mental illnesses that many of them have.

"Prolonged isolation is not going to serve anyone's best interest," he told me. He still thought that prisons needed the option of isolation. "A bad violation should, I think, land you there for about ninety days, but it should not go beyond that."

He is apparently not alone among prison officials. Over the years, he has come to know commissioners in nearly every state in the country. "I believe that today you'll probably find that two-thirds or three-fourths of the heads of correctional agencies will largely share the position that I articulated with you," he said.

Commissioners are not powerless. They could eliminate prolonged isolation with the stroke of a pen. So, I asked, why haven't they? He told me what happened when he tried to move just one prisoner out of isolation. Legislators called for him to be fired and threatened to withhold basic funding. Corrections officers called members of the crime victim's family and told them that he'd gone soft on crime. Hostile stories appeared in the tabloids. It is pointless for commissioners to act unilaterally, he said, without a change in public opinion.



This past year, both the Republican and the Democratic Presidential candidates came out firmly for banning torture and closing the facility in Guantánamo Bay, where hundreds of prisoners have been held in years-long isolation. Neither Barack Obama nor John McCain, however, addressed the question of whether prolonged solitary confinement is torture. For a Presidential candidate, no less than for the prison commissioner, this would have been political suicide. The simple truth is that public sentiment in America is the reason that solitary confinement has exploded in this country, even as other Western nations have taken steps to reduce it. This is the dark side of American exceptionalism. With little concern or demurral, we have consigned tens of thousands of our own citizens to conditions that horrified our highest court a century ago. Our willingness to discard these standards for American prisoners made it easy to discard the Geneva Conventions prohibiting similar treatment of foreign prisoners of war, to the detriment of America's moral stature in the world. In much the same way that a previous generation of Americans countenanced legalized segregation, ours has countenanced legalized torture. And there is no clearer manifestation of this than our routine use of solitary confinement—on our own people, in our own communities, in a supermax prison, for example, that is a thirty-minute drive from my door.

Robert Felton drifted in and out of acute psychosis for much of his solitary confinement. Eventually, however, he found an unexpected resource. One day, while he was at Tamms, he was given a new defense lawyer, and, whatever expertise this lawyer provided, the more important thing was genuine human contact. He visited regularly, and sent Felton books. Although some were rejected by the authorities and Felton was restricted to a few at a time, he devoured those he was permitted. "I liked political books," he says. " 'From Beirut to Jerusalem,' Winston Churchill, Noam Chomsky."

That small amount of contact was a

lifeline. Felton corresponded with the lawyer about what he was reading. The lawyer helped him get his G.E.D. and a paralegal certificate through a correspondence course, and he taught Felton how to advocate for himself. Felton began writing letters to politicians and prison officials explaining the misery of his situation, opposing supermax isolation, and asking for a chance to return to the general prison population. (The Illinois Department of Corrections would not comment on Felton's case, but a spokesman stated that "Tamms houses the most disruptive, violent, and problematic inmates.") Felton was persuasive enough that Senator Paul Simon, of Illinois, wrote him back and, one day, even visited him. Simon asked the director of the State Department of Corrections, Donald Snyder, Jr., to give consideration to Felton's objections. But Snyder didn't budge. If there was anyone whom Felton fantasized about taking revenge upon, it was Snyder. Felton continued to file request after request. But the answer was always no.

On July 12, 2005, at the age of thirty-three, Felton was finally released. He hadn't socialized with another person since entering Tamms, at the age of twenty-five. Before his release, he was given one month in the general prison population to get used to people. It wasn't enough. Upon returning to society, he found that he had trouble in crowds. At a party of well-wishers, the volume of social stimulation overwhelmed him and he panicked, headed for a bathroom, and locked himself in. He stayed at his mother's house and kept mostly to himself.

For the first year, he had to wear an ankle bracelet and was allowed to leave home only for work. His first job was at a Papa John's restaurant, delivering pizzas. He next found work at the Model Star Laundry Service, doing pressing. This was a steady job, and he began to settle down. He fell in love with a waitress named Brittany. They moved into a three-room house that her grandmother lent them, and got engaged. Brittany became pregnant.

This is not a story with a happy ending. Felton lost his job with the laundry service. He went to work for a tree-cutting business; a few months later, it went under. Meanwhile, he and Brittany had had a second child. She had found work as a certified nursing assistant, but her income wasn't nearly enough. So he took a job forty miles away, at Plastipak, the plastics manufacturer, where he made seven-fifty an hour inspecting Gatorade bottles and Crisco containers as they came out of the stamping machines. Then his twenty-year-old Firebird died. The bus he had to take ran erratically, and he was fired for repeated tardiness.

When I visited Felton in Danville last August, he and Brittany were upbeat about their prospects. She was working extra shifts at a nursing home, and he was taking care of their children, ages one and two. He had also applied to a six-month training program for heating and air-conditioning technicians.

"I could make twenty dollars an hour after graduation," he said.

"He's a good man," Brittany told me, taking his arm and giving him a kiss.

But he was out of work. They were chronically short of money. It was hard to be optimistic about Felton's prospects. And, indeed, six weeks after we met, he was arrested for breaking into a car dealership and stealing a Dodge Charger. He pleaded guilty and, in January, began serving a seven-year sentence.

Before I left town—when there was still a glimmer of hope for him—we went out for lunch at his favorite place, a Mexican restaurant called La Potosina. Over enchiladas and Cokes, we talked about his family, Danville, the economy, and, of course, his time in prison. The strangest story had turned up in the news, he said. Donald Snyder, Jr., the state prison director who had refused to let him out of solitary confinement, had been arrested, convicted, and sentenced to two years in prison for taking fifty thousand dollars in payoffs from lobbyists.

"Two years in prison," Felton marvelled. "He could end up right where I used to be."

I asked him, "If he wrote to you, asking if you would release him from solitary, what would you do?"

Felton didn't hesitate for a second. "If he wrote to me to let him out, I'd let him out," he said.

This surprised me. I expected anger, vindictiveness, a desire for retribution. "You'd let him out?" I said.

"I'd let him out," he said, and he put his fork down to make the point. "I wouldn't wish solitary confinement on anybody. Not even him." ♦

"And this is my significant mother."

LETTER FROM CHINA

WASTEPAPER QUEEN

She's China's Horatio Alger hero. Will her fortune survive?

BY EVAN OSNOS

Last fall, on the afternoon of October 10th, Cheung Yan was preparing to unveil the year-end financial summary for Nine Dragons Paper, the enterprise that she co-founded thirteen years ago and built into China's largest paper manufacturer. The press conference had drawn reporters and cameramen to a ballroom at Hong Kong's Island Shangri-La Hotel, and, just before it was scheduled to begin, Cheung sat in a hushed anteroom, alone on a silk sofa, collecting her thoughts.

She wore a chartreuse mandarin-collared jacket buttoned to her chin, and her hair was no-fuss short. At the age of fifty-two, Cheung is petite but sturdy, with an expressive face that radiates intensity. Inside her company, she is known as the Chairlady. Throughout China, she is also known as the Queen of Trash. She earned her nickname by conquering an obscure niche that tunes global trade to peak efficiency: she buys mountains of filthy American wastepaper, hauls it to China at cheap rates, then pulps and reforms it into paperboard for boxes bearing goods marked "Made in China." One of her factories is the largest paper mill in the world.

After Cheung registered her company on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange, in 2006, she rose to No. 1 on a list of China's richest people, becoming the first woman to hold the position. The *Hurun Report*, the Shanghai magazine that produces the list, estimated her worth that year at $3.4 billion. The following year, Cheung's wealth ballooned further, to more than ten billion dollars, and the magazine calculated that she was the richest self-made woman in the world, ahead of Meg Whitman and J. K. Rowling. She became a star of China's industrial revolution: a plainspoken manufacturing baroness and a mother of two. When Oprah did a segment on inspirational mothers around the globe, she showed a clip about Cheung and said, "I love a self-made mom."

Yet to financial analysts the timing of Cheung's press conference was ominous; as in politics, a corporate announcement reserved for 4:15 P.M. on a Friday is rarely upbeat. They were right: consumer demand was sinking in America, and factories in China that buy cardboard were shutting down. The global trade that had built Cheung's fortune was now dismantling it. Almost as remarkable was a recent reversal of her public image. Within a few months, she had become the antihero of an era in China in which unbridled capitalism had driven the gap between rich and poor to its greatest divide since economic reforms began, thirty years ago. A labor-rights group had accused Cheung of being a sweatshop boss, and a Chinese newspaper invoked the exploitation of the American Gilded Age to accuse her of "turning blood into gold." Her stock price had tumbled, slashing her personal wealth by more than seven billion dollars in less than a year, by *Hurun's* estimate. Her company was saddled with so much debt that Mark Chang, a Merrill Lynch analyst, told me that the question was "Will they go bust?"

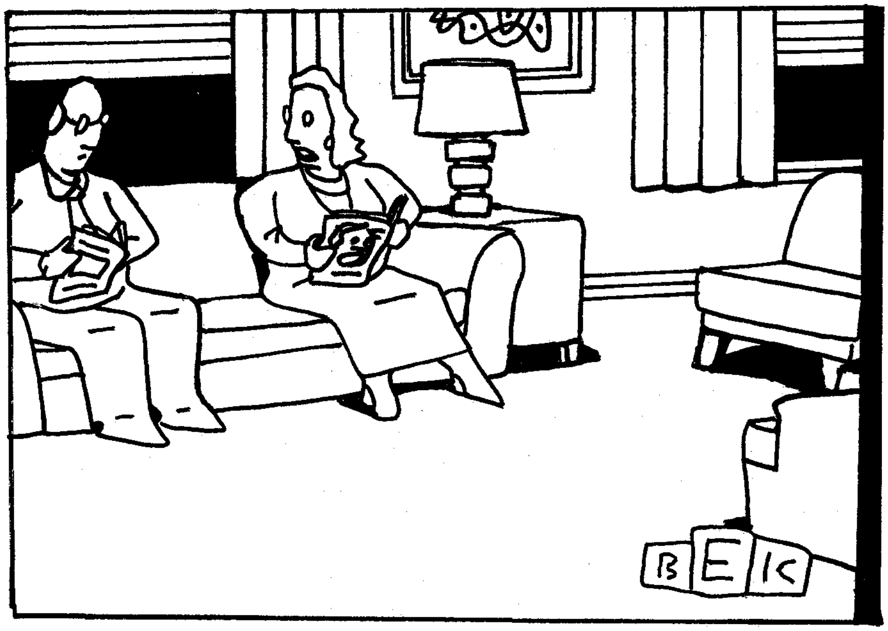
The spectacle of one of China's richest industrialists reduced to a struggle for solvency suggests some of the pressures posed by a slowdown that has unnerved Chinese leaders in its speed and depth. Deng Xiaoping once ordained a starring role for plutocrats. "*Rang yi bu fen ren xian fu qi lai*," he declared. "Let some people get rich first." In the thirty years since Deng unshackled China's economy, the entrepreneurs who stitched it into global markets have made China far more prosperous, but also, it turns out, acutely vulnerable. In the southern city of Dongguan, where Nine Dragons is based, Smart Union, a giant toymaker with some sixty-five hundred employees that once supplied Mattel and Hasbro, went bust so fast last October that throngs of its workers swarmed the plant's gates, demanding unpaid wages. The local government sent riot police to guard the plant and appealed to the angry workers not to do "anything that would hurt or cause concern to your parents and family." Other factory bosses on the brink have simply fled without a trace. At least six hundred and seventy thousand Chinese businesses failed last year, according to the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a government-run think tank. These events hardly signal an end to China's economic rise—a certain level of labor unrest and business turnover exists in China in the best of times—but the scale has begun to look less like an ordinary downturn than like a pivot in the very nature of China's surge into the free market. "One of the characteristic features of American capitalism since the Gilded Age has been its ruthless readiness to abandon unprofitable sectors," Niall Ferguson, the Harvard historian, told me. "Once upon a time, the American textile industry was an enormous part of the economy. It scarcely exists anymore."

Waiting to face the cameras on October 10th, Cheung let out a short, awkward laugh and told me, "I'm in a good mood." She scanned the faces around her, which included her husband, her brother, and two executives. "You have to be confident in order to make others confident," she said, and stalked down the hall toward the press. By the time her event was over, the share price of Nine Dragons had sunk another sixteen per cent, to the equivalent of twenty-three cents, its lowest level ever.

Despite Deng's proclamation, China is deeply ambivalent about its tycoons. For a long time, they were ciphers. (In 2002, *Forbes* published its list of China's richest, with a photograph of people wearing paper bags over their

WPN

Cheung Yan says, "We only have a certain number of opportunities in our lifetime." Photograph by Andrew Rowat.



"I'm more of a 'How Jen stays thin' person than a 'Why Jen won't leave Brad alone' person."

heads.) But in the early years of this decade tycoons preened as more of them took companies public, and their ranks soared. In 2006, the number of Chinese billionaires jumped sevenfold, to a hundred and six people, by *Hurun's* count, encompassing property developers, Internet techies, and retail magnates. But this era of glamour has been accompanied by an era of prosecution. Yang Bin, a flower-growing mogul who was once ranked as the second-richest person in China, is serving eighteen years in prison on fraud and bribery charges. Last November, Wong Kwong-Yu, the founder of an electric-appliance chain called Gome and the reigning richest person in China, was reportedly detained in what the Chinese press called an investigation into manipulation of shares in his brother's pharmaceutical company. (Wong resigned from Gome's board earlier this year; a company representative would not comment on the investigation.) At such moments, the rich list has come to be called the "death list."

Cheung hedges by casting herself as a kind of socialist Horatio Alger hero. "We all sacrifice a lot for the company," she told me when I visited her at her office last fall. "It is very demanding. It's not like, Today, I expend effort and tomorrow I go off and play golf or go shopping!" The headquarters of Nine Dragons Paper sprawls across a site, nearly a square mile in area, in Dongguan, a port-city fusion of industry and luxury that calls to mind the oil capitals of the Persian Gulf. Cranes and smokestacks shimmer in the heat beside manicured topiaries and overchilled office towers. The twelve-story office of Nine Dragons is topped by an emerald-green glass pyramid directly above Cheung's executive suite. Visitors to her floor are greeted by a gurgling white stone fountain in the shape of a lotus, roughly as tall as she is. Since her announcement in Hong Kong, Cheung had been inundated with questions from bankers, investors, and securities analysts about the fate of the company, and this had sharpened her characteristic pugnaciousness. "Why are we in debt?" she asked, fixing me with a level gaze. "I didn't misuse this money on derivatives or something! I took a high level of risk because that is the preparation for the future, so that we will be first in the market when things change."

Compared with some of the flashier members of China's new generation of super-rich, Cheung is an unreconstructed industrialist. Where they are cool and serene, she is impish and combustible. They pursue a work-life balance and experiment with Taoism; she maintains devout faith only in production. Like others her age—she is old enough to have witnessed the havoc of the Cultural Revolution and young enough to have recovered from it—Cheung is impatient with ideology, but her faith in efficiency borders on the counterproductive; by her count, she is pulled over for speeding at least once a year, because she "can't stand wasting time on the road." Cheung is perpetually leaning forward, propelled around the room by spasms of exuberance. In conversation, she can sound as if she were channelling China's industrial id. When I asked her about the future of a company that seemed to have grown faster than its market, she shook her head. "The market waits for no one," she said. "If I don't develop today, if I wait for a year, or two or three years, to develop, I will have nothing for the market, and I will miss the opportunity. And we will just be very ordinary, like any other factory!" She went on, "We only have a certain number of opportunities in our lifetime. Once you miss it, it's gone forever."

Opportunities have vanished faster than expected. A year ago, China's leaders worried about inflation and an economy that they believed was growing too fast. Since then, economic growth has dropped to its lowest point since 2001, and the World Bank is forecasting that China's growth will sink to 6.5 per cent this year, the lowest point in at least nineteen years. To check the slide, the government has announced a stimulus plan worth four trillion yuan, or five hundred and eighty-six billion dollars. Nearly half of that will go toward the construction of railways, roads, airports, and power supplies, and a quarter is earmarked for reconstruction following the Sichuan earthquake and other disasters. (Some economists warn that the effect could be limited, because part of that spending was already planned.) Unemployment and crime are increasing, and the state media have begun to warn that social unrest could rise. President Hu Jintao hasn't bothered to conceal the fact that the crisis has become a matter of political survival—"a test of our Party's capacity to govern," as he put it in the official *People's Daily* newspaper.

As Cheung and I talked, her husband, Liu Ming Chung, ambled in and slumped into a chair beside her. He had been trained as a dental surgeon, but he now serves as the C.E.O. of Nine Dragons. He is tall and approachably low-key, her physical opposite. When she speaks, she swats and grips the air for emphasis, alternating between Cantonese and Mandarin, which she utters with a pronounced Manchurian accent. To Chinese ears, this identifies her as a product of China's frigid northeast, a hard-drinking industrial domain known for its prolific production of two species: entrepreneurs and corrupt bureaucrats. Cheung spends much of her time in Hong Kong, a city that sanctifies aristocracy, yet the persona she projects is that of a harried manager. Her fingers are bejewelled, but she shows little interest in amassing influence, real estate, art, or any of the usual trappings of wealth. Over the years, she has shed a wardrobe of loud prints and lacy cuffs in favor of Chanel-style suits, yet she seems interested in name brands only insofar as, in her words, they represent "the kind of image" she tries to maintain. Her ambition is so specific to expanding her business that, had she not become a billionaire papermaker, she would, she thinks, have enjoyed being a stay-at-home mother. At the company's headquarters in China, she and her husband live in a large converted apartment on the top floor of a managers' dormitory. In America, where her two sons are in school, they own a ten-bedroom house in Diamond Bar, California, an affluent cul-de-sac town that is also home to Snoop Dogg.

While Cheung was describing her plan to shore up the business, her husband interrupted. "I have something to add," he said softly. "Recently, many people came to knock on our doors. So I say, if things are as bad for us as the press is saying, why are they still thinking of buying us? If I have a cold and am really sick, why do you still want to sit right next to me?"

"It means we're still very attractive!" Cheung said, and she howled at her own joke.

Cheung was born into a military family, the eldest of eight children. Her parents named her Xiuhua, a revolutionary-era catchphrase meaning "excellent China." She later swapped it for Yan, a more contemporary name. (She also goes by Zhang Yin, the Mandarin version of Cheung Yan.) She grew up in the coal-mining city of Jixi, which lies so far northeast—north of Vladivostok—that its inhabitants take a steely pride in being the first Chinese to see the sunrise.

Conditions were austere; the family ate meat only on holidays. Cheung's father, Zhang De En, had been a company commander in the Red Army, but during the Cultural Revolution he was branded a "rightist" and jailed for three years. Cheung rarely mentions this, and only to explain why she never went to college. She said, "I had eight brothers and sisters and my dad was in prison, so I went out to work when I was young, because my brothers and sisters were even younger." She added, "It taught me never to retreat, even if things are getting very tough, and that is something I would never have learned in college."

As the oldest child, Cheung cultivated a sense of discipline and rigor, according to her sister Zhang Xiubo. "There is nothing my sister hates more than lazy people," Zhang Xiubo told a Chinese interviewer. "We obey her unconditionally."

When Cheung was in her late teens, the family moved south, to a city in coastal Guangdong Province. At the time, China had recently begun its experiments with the free market. She found work as a bookkeeper in a fabric factory, and studied accounting at a trade school. She then moved to a bigger company to run the accounting and trade departments, which afforded her a good salary and contacts in Hong Kong. While working in the trade department, she befriended an older paper-mill boss from the northern province of Liaoning, who proposed that she move to Hong Kong, in order to get into the wastepaper trade. "I'm thinking, I'm going to go to such a cosmopolitan place to scavenge through trash heaps?" she recalled. "But he said, 'Don't look down on wastepaper. Wastepaper is a forest.' So now I think that old guy was pretty clever."

By the time Cheung was twenty-eight, she had saved thirty thousand yuan (about eight thousand dollars), and she moved to Hong Kong. She met two partners and they formed a company, Ying Gang Shen, to ship wastepaper up the coast to Chinese paper mills. "She was shrewd, very gutsy, willing to learn," Ng Waitang, one of her former partners, recalled when I visited him at the trash yard that he runs in an industrial stretch of Hong Kong. More important, Cheung brought the pivotal asset: the paper mill in Liaoning, which promised to buy whatever they collected.

Ng, a thick, genial man with pillowy bags under his eyes, marvelled at Cheung's audacious charm, even when it seemed excessive. "We were three equal partners, but, in the beginning, she always picked up the check at meals," he said. "That embarrassed us, so eventually we started splitting the checks equally." The partners set up shop in a bare four-hundred-square-foot office. They received an early lesson in surviving a business infested with corruption. "People would try to sell you wet paper or moldy paper that's not usable. It is heavier, so they make more money," Ng explained, as a fork loader rumbled past the office door. "After a while, you figure out who is good and who is not, who you can trust and who you can't." As in America, the Hong Kong waste-management business was dogged by organized crime, the syndicates known in China as Triads. "They would come and threaten us," Ng said. "But I would tell them, 'Go ahead and burn the place down! I work for a mainland company, so I don't care. I just get a salary.' They were all threats, no action."

China's new industries had a seemingly bottomless appetite for recyclable paper, and, after two years, Cheung headed to the mainland in search of more. But Chinese paper wasn't good for recycling; it relied heavily on vegetable sources, because the nation had been especially short of trees since the nineteen-fifties, when industrialization campaigns denuded the landscape. Instead, Cheung resolved to try the place known in the trash world as "the Saudi Arabia of scrap": the United States.

Americans use about thirty million tons of containerboard each year, more than any other kind of paper, and enough to cover every inch of the state of Massachusetts, with some left over. The material is made from trees and from what papermakers call O.C.C., for "old corrugated containers." Around three-quarters of all O.C.C. in America gets sifted from the trash and recycled, and that posed the ultimate target for Cheung's business. She arrived in Los Angeles in 1990, accompanied by Liu Ming Chung, whom she had met while working in Hong Kong. Although he was of Taiwanese origin, he spoke English with a Latin-American accent, because he had grown up in Brazil, where his parents worked as grocers. When they met, Liu thought, This is a beautiful girl. And very, very smart. At Cheung's suggestion, he gave up dentistry for the paper business, and they went to America, where they married. (Cheung had a son from a previous marriage that had ended in divorce.) Together, they founded a company called America Chung Nam, which is Cantonese for America South China. They rented an apartment in Monterey Park, an area with a large concentration of Chinese immigrants; the apartment served as both office and home. "I was really happy in the early days of starting the business, no matter how hard it was," Cheung said. "At least we worked hard together." Their meagre business consumed only a few hours of the day. "My wife still remembers how I cooked fried beef for her," Liu said. "She says the last time I did that was seventeen years ago." These days, their offices are on different floors of the corporate tower; in public, they refer to each other as "Chief Liu" and "the Chairlady." "At this stage, both of us are so busy we hardly do things together," Cheung told me. "So I'm delighted if we are simply on the same flight."

WHEN THE SNAKE BECAME A MAN

1.
When the snake became a man,
he couldn't stop swallowing
one rat after another until
he became so large he couldn't
constrict his prey. He hired
a number of smaller snakes
not men or barely so to strangle
the rats for him and a surgeon
to make an opening in his tail
over which he wore a velvet hat
when not extruding his meals.

2.
When the elk became a man,
he found he wanted longer horns
and took it as a sign from God
that horn-grow cream appeared
around the same time as his wish.
He dipped the tips of his antlers
faithfully into the jars, having
first glued their bottoms to his sink—
it was just too awkward otherwise.
Soon his rack became so high
he could not raise his head
so bought a titanium crane
that followed him on little wheels,
took pictures, and sorted his socks.

The new partners set out in search of scrap yards that were willing to sell to strangers. "They came knocking on our door—a cold call," David Cho, the chief financial officer of Bestway Recycling, in Los Angeles, told me. "They came together, in an old red Cadillac, but the initial impression was very positive. They were earnest." Not every deal went so smoothly. "They had to fight their way in," Maurice (Big Moe) Colontonio, a paper recycler in South Jersey, told me. Colontonio is a fit and energetic man in his late fifties, with deep-set eyes and a lantern jaw, which give him a resemblance to Joe Torre, the baseball manager. His business, Tab Paper Recycling, works what could be called the Greater Atlantic City area, from a plant opposite a casino-supply outlet in the town of West Berlin.

"The Chinese came to us packers, and they said, 'Will you sell to us?'" Colontonio told me one afternoon as we sat in the plant office. "But it was always an old-boy network in this business. I sold to someone I knew, and that person sold to people he knew. And now we've got these people—we don't know them—and they're selling to China? How are we going to be paid? Who are we going to chase?"

In the years since, American paper mills have closed in large numbers, but recyclers like Colontonio have thrived, thanks largely to foreign demand. Moe—the son and grandson of "glorified trashmen," as he puts it—learned to ski in Aspen and to yacht in the Chesapeake. (He recently upgraded from a forty-six-foot yacht to a fifty-foot vessel, which he christened Paradise II.) After dinner at a nouveau-Italian place nearby, Colontonio steered his GMC Yukon Hybrid into the parking lot at Wal-Mart and around back to the superstore's trash yard, which had been fenced off to keep scrap thieves away. "Let's get out of the car," he said. "We're not going to get locked up. I know all the cops in this town."

The wastepaper had been lashed into boulder-size bundles known as "sandwich bales," the kind that Colontonio's guys collect and break open, in order to fish out the rotting garbage, which professionals call "organic." The smell was powerful, but Colontonio looked pleased to have brought me to the front lines of his business. The sandwich bales formed a wall of crushed cardboard boxes, each marked with a brand name—d-CON mouse traps, Kit Kat candy—packed layer upon layer, a geological record of modern New Jersey. More than half of it will end up in China. "We have become a country of purchasers, not manufacturers," Colontonio said.

The migration of manufacturing was accelerating when Cheung arrived in the United States, and she intended to profit from it. Ships from China were arriving in California fully loaded, only to head home with expensive vacan-

3.
When the whale became a man,
it was really no big deal, the whale
already a Sea World celebrity,
people used to seeing him in a tux.
The orca bit would have to go,
of course, the cant about his not being
such a killer. No, he liked to kill
well enough, it was his culture
and he wasn't going to be ashamed
of it any more than werewolves were
of theirs. He thought he'd write a song.

4.
When the man became a man,
his dog became despondent,
having been a man himself
for quite some time. "A fine
thing to do at our stage of life,"
he said. Best friends with the man
for many years, he understood
the strange things likely to happen
when a man became a man.
The TV would go for one thing
and who knew what else after.
He wasn't about to wait around
and watch the transformation.
He packed up his bones
in their matching bone cases,
dusted off his real-estate license,
and headed down the road.

—*Garret Keizer*

cies. Cheung took advantage of the discounts created by this trade imbalance, and America Chung Nam flourished. It amassed its own fleet of trucks and lured customers by buying wastepaper at prices twenty per cent above the market, one competitor recalled. (An A.C.N. representative denied that the company had ever done this, and Cheung herself said, "Would any rational business pay such a high premium for a commodity that's available in the market?") Trash dealers steered more and more of their paper toward China, and before long America Chung Nam was "the six-hundred-pound gorilla," Cho said. By 2001, Cheung's company had reached an extraordinary milestone: it had surpassed global giants such as DuPont and Procter & Gamble to become the single largest exporter, by volume, of freight from the United States. In other words, nobody in America was shipping more of anything each year anywhere in the world.

Chinese factories were growing so fast that Cheung returned to China in 1995 determined to climb from the waste-paper trade into the packaging business. It was a trade that had been a curiously keen barometer of the economy ever since 1879, when a Manhattan printer, Robert Gair, blundered into a lucrative discovery. One of his pressmen was printing on the surface of paper bags when he accidentally sliced neatly through the paper. Gair, a tall, thrifty Scotsman and the son of a plumber, realized that he had found a way to mass-produce cardboard patterns—boxes.

Gair's box, a cheap, light alternative to wood, became "the swaddling clothes of our metropolitan civilization," Lewis Mumford wrote. Eventually, the National Biscuit Company introduced its first crackers that stayed crispy in a sealed paper box, and an avalanche of manufacturers followed. Gair expanded to ten buildings on the Brooklyn waterfront. Massive migration from Europe to the United States created a manufacturing workforce in Brooklyn, to churn out ale, coffee, soap, and Brillo pads—and Gair made boxes right beside them. He loathed unions, according to his biographer H. Allen Smith, and his plants were sweltering, harsh places driven by his belief that a man "can outwork and outlast a dozen mules." By 1916, Gair was running the nation's largest box factory, and had become one of the country's earliest adopters of group life insurance for his workers. The neighborhood, now part of DUMBO, was known then as Gairsville.

Dongguan, in the Pearl River Delta, was a perfect locale for Nine Dragons. It was a boom town, and soon became the raucous epicenter of China's capitalist frontier. A demographic bulge of young people, and slumping farm prices, had unmoored tens of millions of people from inland villages who were stepping off trains each day in Dongguan in search of work. Factories sprang up at such cookie-cutter speed that they came to be known as the Dongguan Model. They cranked out clothes, shoes, toys, and, eventually, computers and appliances—all of it destined to be packaged in cardboard boxes.

The term "paper machine" refers to a production line that can stretch two football fields in length and cost between one hundred million and two hundred million dollars. A typical paper mill might revolve around one or two machines, but Cheung used her success in the recycling trade to attract easy financing, and the first paper machine that she installed was followed by another, then another, and then one more; last year, the Dongguan plant had a total of thirteen paper machines, and had become the world's largest paper mill. The factory runs twenty hours a day on its own coal-burning power plant.

Size itself became an advantage. Economies of scale gave Cheung two to three per cent extra on her net profit margin, and her profits climbed. By 2005, she was preparing to take Nine Dragons public, amid high expectations. "It was kind of a textbook company—you'd see it in a Harvard Business School case study," Andrew Dale, the head of basic materials research at Macquarie Capital Securities in Hong Kong, recalled. "You pick a name that captures the hearts of offshore investors—Nine Dragons; it sounds pretty exotic, pretty Chinese—you put new machines on the ground, where the demand is. You run a low-cost operation. . . . It all worked very well."

But, privately, Cheung was chafing under the bankers' scrutiny. "I was in business for myself for more than twenty years, never having been managed," she told the Shanghai *Securities News*. "Now, going public, every clause comes up, requiring you to do things like this and like that. Every step of the process makes you agitated."

On March 3, 2006, Nine Dragons went public, and by day's end the share price had risen forty per cent. Investor demand was so heavy that the company issued millions of additional shares, raising five hundred and four million dollars—Hong Kong's biggest début so far that year. And that fall, when the *Hurun Report* ranked Cheung No. 1, the Chinese media flocked to her story. Headlines declared, "CHINA'S RICHEST WOMAN MADE FORTUNE FROM SCRATCH" and "THE ONE WHO CHANGED THE GENDER OF THE WEALTHIEST." In interviews, Cheung drank in the acclaim, calling her company "a big family" with "a far-sighted vision," and touting the virtues of restraint: "If I only have the ability to build a three-star hotel, I will never rashly build a five-star hotel." One year after it had gone public, Nine Dragons stock was trading at forty times earnings, more than triple what paper-company stocks typically sell for. In the press, Cheung was a national celebrity, mentioned alongside sports heroes as a candidate to carry the Olympic torch on its final relay leg in Beijing. That fall, she ceded her position atop the rich list to Yang Huiyan, a twenty-six-year-old Ohio State graduate, whose father, a property developer, had transferred all the shares of his company's stock to her, leaving her with an estimated $17.5-billion fortune. But this did little to dim Cheung's ambitions. In December, Nine Dragons announced its largest expansion yet: nearly a billion dollars in new capacity to be added over a two-year period. Cheung had more than ten thousand workers, and was on pace to double the company's output in another two years. In a letter to shareholders, she declared, "By June 2008, we expect to become the world's largest packaging paperboard manufacturer."

Chinese tycoons are not, in the Russian sense, oligarchs; they enjoy little independent power and offer no opposition. But the country's leaders keep them close, and Cheung holds a seat on the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a top government advisory body.

In March of 2008, during the conference's annual closed-door meeting in Beijing's Great Hall of the People, Cheung proposed three things: tax reforms that would include a tax cut of one-third for the nation's wealthiest citizens, lower duties on imported environmental equipment, and, most controversial, exemptions from a new labor law designed to protect low-paid factory workers. But she had badly misjudged China's political mood: the press seized on what it dubbed Cheung's "pro-rich" agenda, and took the rare step of reporting an internal political dispute. Shi Dingguo, a fellow-adviser and the former deputy head of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Beijing Language and Culture University, denigrated her proposals. "She is speaking for herself and people like her," Shi said, according to an account by the state news service. "She is rich [and] running a labor-intensive, polluting business that needs to import environmental remediation facilities." (Cheung disputes this, saying that her company has been praised by the local environmental authorities.)

The labor law, implemented in January of 2008, was supposed to blunt rising unrest among Chinese workers. It forced factory bosses to sign written contracts, limit overtime, and provide severance pay. But Cheung decried it as a return to the "iron rice bowl," a Chinese term for absolute job security, and echoed other entrepreneurs, who warned that the law would spike labor costs at a time when they were already struggling with stricter pollution controls and rising rents.

Cheung attracted intense criticism. "Excuse me, Cheung Yan: Whose benefit? Whose nation?" the commentator Shi Yong wrote on China Elections and Governance, a political Web site. He accused her of deepening the disparity between "the powerless and the powerful," and declared that the income gap could lead to a "structural breakdown to the point of explosion."

The criticism came as a surprise. "I honestly didn't expect it," Cheung told me. She had so miscalculated the uproar that her proposals would produce that she had packed sneakers and exercise clothes, in anticipation of a relaxing week in Beijing. They never left her suitcase. Cheung is a poor politician. She remains unapologetically attached to her ideas, even though Chinese political culture would usually require her to yield to the consensus. "If I wanted to be political, I wouldn't have raised the proposal so directly," she said. "As a member of the political conference, I am charged with bringing any kind of suggestion to the government. I thought I must look at it from the perspective of my own industry." When a trade-union official called for a debate with her on the labor law, Cheung thanked him for the invitation but declined. ("I'm frankly very busy," she said at the time.) To make matters worse, she added a comment that would bind her public image to China's most sensitive political divide: "If a country does not have both the rich and the poor, it will not become strong and affluent."

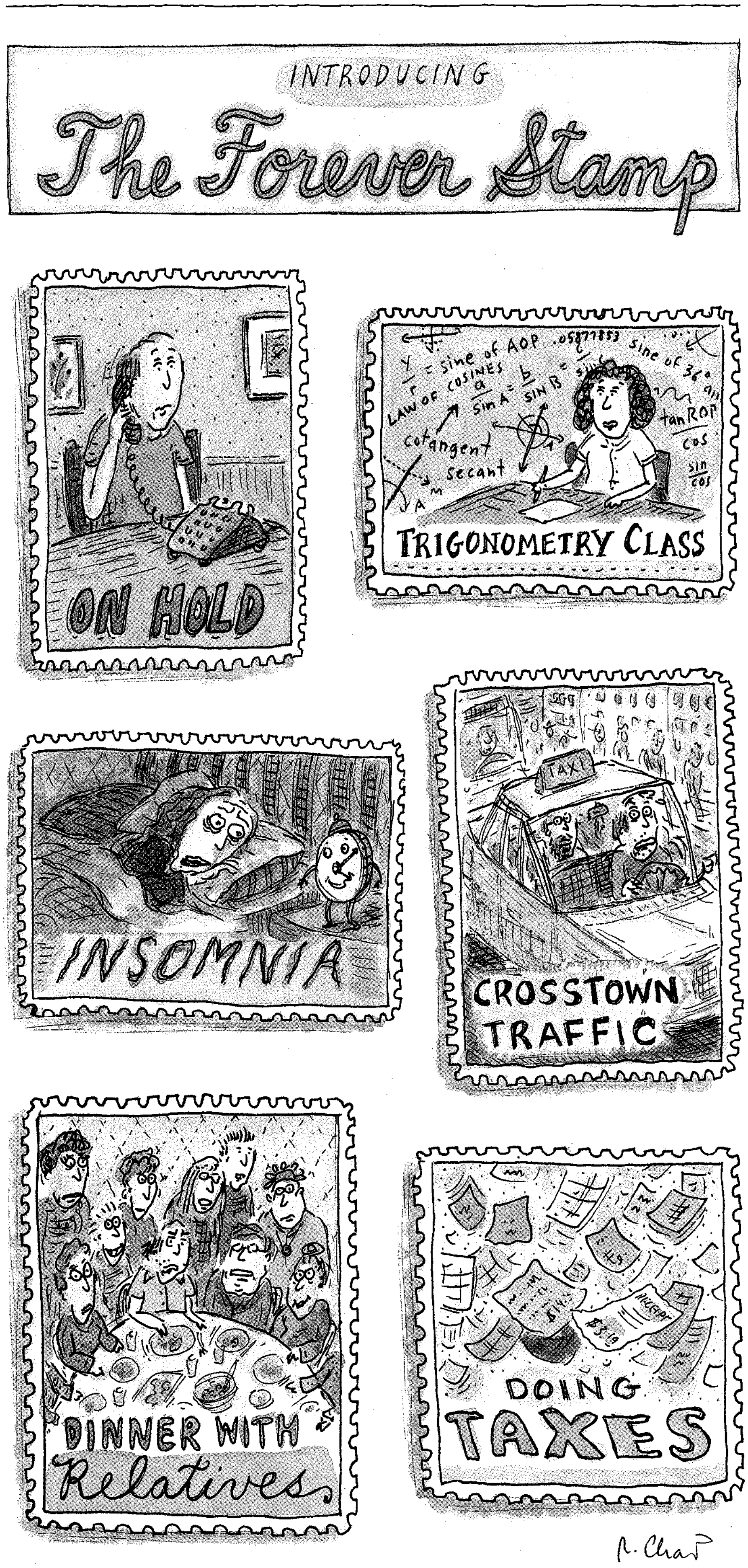
The "pro-rich" controversy was still raging when, on April 15, 2008, Students and Scholars against Corporate Misbehavior, a labor-rights group in Hong Kong, released "Sweatshop Paper," an investigation in which Nine Dragons was accused of labor abuses, including industrial accidents, inadequate safety equipment, and discrimination against carriers of hepatitis B, a common ailment in China.

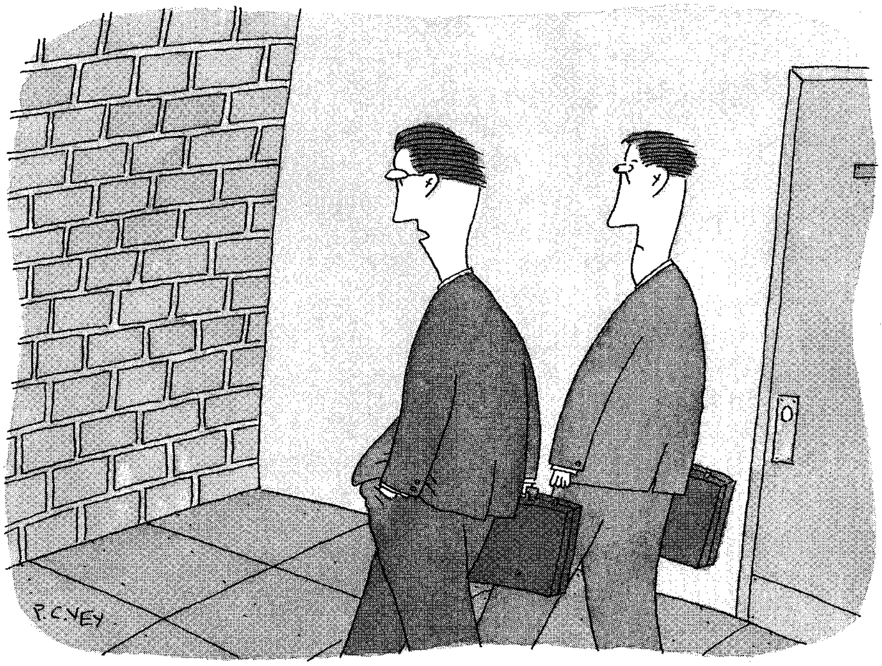
The report also made public the "Nine Dragons Paper Employee Handbook," which sketched an idiosyncratic world inside Cheung's factories. Do's and don'ts included: no funeral leave of more than two days for the death of a child, spouse, or parent; no mustaches on men or tattoos on women. Other injunctions were: "Respect the leaders. Stop walking when meeting senior leaders and greet them. Stand behind senior leaders when walking together." Workers were subject to a wide range of fines, such as three hundred yuan for spitting out the window of a company bus or cutting line in the cafeteria; five hundred yuan for napping, permitting an outsider to view the factory, or playing mah-jongg; a thousand yuan and dismissal for organizing a strike, or "spreading rumors which cause harm to the company." The handbook also noted that wages are confidential, and that "revealing one's salary" or "asking others" is grounds for dismissal.

When the report appeared, Cheung was unreachable, on an overseas road show in advance of a three-hundred-million-dollar bond issue. When she returned, she responded angrily, saying, "We became wealthy because we found the right business model to change used paper into treasure—not by treating workers harshly." (She told a Chinese interviewer, "After my divorce, I had told myself I could not cry again. This was the first time.") The company gave out more in bonuses than it withheld in penalties, she said. And she questioned the political motives of the labor-rights group, saying that it "received money from Europe" and suggesting, darkly, that it wanted to cast a cloud over the Olympics. (After an investigation, the provincial trade union criticized the penalty system and other management practices but pronounced Nine Dragons "a relatively good enterprise.") Cheung told me that the company has stopped fining workers. A more calculating executive might have stopped there, but Cheung edged forward in her chair to explain that, in fact, she still believes fines are a legitimate tactic under the right conditions. "If you don't impose fines, workers are not careful and they will get injured and come back to ask for more compensation," she said emphatically.

The sweatshop accusation only intensified criticism of Cheung. *Sanlian Shenghuo*, a prominent magazine, urged her to resign from the People's Consultative Conference "if she still has any sense." It went on, "Every piece of paper produced by Nine Dragons . . . is soaked with the blood of labor."

Labor problems flared. In December of 2007, several hundred workers had staged a three-day strike, blocking traffic in front of the plant in Dongguan because they believed that Cheung intended to cheat them out of benefits to which they would be entitled under the new labor law that was then pending. (She denies any such plan.) The following summer, laid-off workers, who had





"Security's really tight in this building."

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been employed through an outsourcing agency, protested in front of the factory. Police moved in and reportedly detained twelve people; several others were treated at the hospital for injuries. Cheung's brother Zhang Chengfei, the company's deputy C.E.O., told reporters that about two hundred workers had been laid off and compensated, after being replaced by machines that would improve efficiency.

But problems ran deeper. On Wall Street, doubts had emerged about Cheung's ability to sustain such rapid growth. In July of 2007, Chip Dillon, then a Citigroup analyst, had warned that Nine Dragons "is already experiencing equipment delays." More important, Dillon calculated that the planet simply might not have enough old boxes to meet Cheung's demand.

The following March, only six months after her stock had reached its record high of 26.25 Hong Kong dollars, the share price tumbled nearly forty per cent in one day. World markets were slumping and had grown increasingly uneasy about projects laden with debt. Cheung's expansion plan looked like the Spruce Goose of the paper industry, and her stock price continued to plummet through the summer. By last fall, it had dropped so far that the company's market value was less than half the value of its own phalanx of paper machines.

In October, Cheung announced that Nine Dragons' net profits had fallen 6.3 per cent—sixteen per cent below expectations—and that the company would pay back more than a hundred and ninety-two million dollars in loans ahead of schedule, in order to limit credit risk. It would also delay construction on a number of new mills for at least two years.

The company's future was unclear. "It either goes broke or it survives and you make a lot of upside," Andrew Dale, of Macquarie, said. "The reality of it is that it got way out of control." Dale speculated that, once debt markets improved, perhaps a European company would move to buy it; Cheung's family, which controls more than seventy per cent of the stock, would have to agree to such a proposal.

In December, Standard & Poor's downgraded Nine Dragons' credit ratings to junk status, citing the company's increased borrowing and reduced profitability. The downgrading came shortly after *Hurun* had released its latest rich list, which showed that Cheung's fortune had fallen by seventy-four per cent, effectively exiling her from China's top ten and leaving her with a mere $2.6 billion. *Forbes*, which calculated her fortune separately from those of her husband and her brother, estimated her remaining wealth at two hundred and sixty-five million dollars.

A few weeks after Cheung released the company's annual results, she and Liu met me for lunch at the managers' cafeteria beside their office in Dongguan. Liu's face looked slack with fatigue. They had been travelling frequently, visiting bankers and meeting with government officials. "I can only rest when I'm asleep," he said. By now, the problems in their industry had spread to the opposite side of the planet. Chinese factories had stopped buying scrap paper so abruptly that it was backing up in America like a clogged drain. "It's become a crisis," Colontonio said when he called me one day. American trash paper, once valuable, was piling up in warehouses. "It's very bad—very, very bad," he said. "We're all taking pay cuts at the first of the month—my sons, my daughter. There's nothing else we can do. We just have to batten down the hatches and sit tight."

Trade relationships that had been profitable in recent years were souring fast. In one case, a British scrap-metals vender sent a trader to China to pick up payments and ended up accusing its customer of kidnapping the trader over a disputed shipment of copper, brass, zinc, and other metals. "These people came in and dragged me out," Anil Srivastav, a trader with Goldarrow Metals, based outside London, told me. "I shouted 'Help!' but nobody looked. They put me in this van and drove me off. I was thinking, I've only seen these things in movies." (The Chinese company accused by Goldarrow denied any involvement. The trader left China after Goldarrow agreed to provide shipment documents worth three hundred and fifty thousand dollars.)

Before lunch, Cheung had been meeting with yet another in a stampede of bankers. She and her husband were counting down the days until Thanksgiving, which they planned to spend with their children in America. "Both the kids, they don't really have feelings towards Chinese New Year's anymore. So I have to go back for Thanksgiving," Cheung said. Her older son is in New York, where he is earning a master's degree in engineering at Columbia. The younger son attends a boarding school in California, and Cheung is determined that he will end up in the Ivy League. At one point during lunch, her assistant passed her a copy of a college recommendation that a teacher had recently written on her son's behalf. She fell silent to study it and then passed it back.

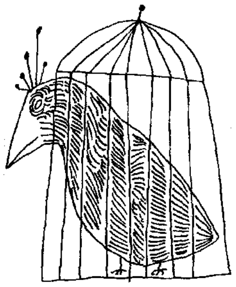
"His G.P.A. is 4.0 to 4.3," she announced to the table. Then, with the pride of an autodidact, she added, "His head is full of American education. He needs to accept some Chinese education as well. Otherwise, he'll be out of balance." The company's problems were no secret to her younger son, she said. "We talk about how much the stock has dropped. He asks about it, and we discuss it. He'll say, 'Hey, oil is really cheap today!'"

Earlier in the week, Liu had heard from the boss of a neighboring factory, one of the world's largest makers of steel shipping containers. It was shutting its plant. Like cardboard boxes, shipping containers were an early economic casualty. Property prices, consumer confidence, and auto sales were all slumping in China, and gallows humor was prevalent among factory owners: get into the pajama business, because before long everyone will be unemployed and spending their days at home.

The larger fact, however, was that the slowdown was also accelerating a change that Chinese leaders and economists had sought for years. They had come to believe that China relied too heavily on factories churning out low-quality exports, which fuel growth but also result in poor working conditions, environmental pollution, and a growing gap between the rich and the poor—"unsteady, unbalanced, uncoördinated, and unsustainable," as Premier Wen Jiabao said in March of 2007. Chinese leaders wanted to ignite domestic consumption and use the new labor law to bring the sweatshop era to a close. For many factories in Dongguan, evolution will mean adapt or die. Local politicians prefer a more poetic image: "emptying the cage for the new birds."

But the slowdown was also politically precarious: cut back too fast and unemployment could lead to political unrest. "So far, there haven't been large-scale layoffs," Jiang Ling, a vice-mayor of Dongguan, told me when I visited him at city hall. But when I walked out of the building that day four middle-aged women with tanned laborers' faces were clamoring, dashing through the topiaries toward the building's front door. When security guards pushed them back, they sat down in the shrubbery and refused to budge. The young guard tasked with shooing me away told me that the women were shouting for greater welfare provisions from city hall.

The question of what will become of Dongguan is difficult to separate from the question of what will become of Cheung. The city is home to thousands of factories that are based on an outmoded business model, rooted in cheap, unprotected labor and thin margins. China would not be what it is today without them, but it's not yet clear who among them is prepared to splash out of the primordial free market into a new age. Closing the income divide is no longer an abstraction: life expectancy in the poor province of Guizhou is now a decade shorter than it is in Beijing; a child born on the remote Qinghai Plateau is seven times more likely to die than a child born in the capital. Even some of China's most energetic cheerleaders of the free market sense the passing of an era. In a recent article on Cheung Yan, the magazine *China Entrepreneur* declared, "In Chinese society five years ago, maybe a company that had achieved success in business, while not being perfect in other respects, would have been tolerated and worshipped. But things have changed."



I mentioned to Cheung and Liu that I had spent time the previous afternoon in the nearby village of Da Sheng, where many of their employees lived. The town square looked like a meeting of rival armies. Each worker was color-coded by location in the factory food chain: blue coveralls for production workers, orange smocks for power-plant staff, and mint-green uniforms for the handlers of wastepaper. A production worker told me that the rumor around the factory was that it might be bankrupt in a month or two. Cheung lowered her chopsticks for a moment. She seemed irritated. "It's very strange that an employee would say that," she said. "These days, there are people out there who don't even have food to eat! But we haven't withheld any salaries. Nobody has gone unpaid." She seemed less bothered by the rumor than by its implied allowance of failure, its apostasy. She was quiet for a moment, and then she said, "Some people are living in such good fortune that they don't know what fortune is anymore."

By the beginning of this year, Cheung's decision to halt construction and to repay loans ahead of schedule seemed to have improved the company's prospects. Mark Chang, of Merrill Lynch—which has since been acquired by Bank of America—told me in an e-mail that the risk of failure "seems to be much lower now." Chinese leaders were helping, too: the economy was souring so fast that they had decided not to let too many birds leave the cage at once. They have suspended minimum-wage increases and restored tax rebates to help some exporters, all aimed at preventing mass layoffs. On February 18th, Nine Dragons released a six-month financial summary that showed that its net profit had dropped 70.3 per cent compared with the same period in the previous year. Cheung said the company had faced a "bleak winter" but thanked government officials, banks, investors, and others for staying supportive. Nine Dragons, it seemed, had become "too big to fail," said Kary Sei, an analyst at ICEA Finance Holdings, in Hong Kong.

At one point during our lunch, I asked Cheung if she still hoped to be the world's largest cardboard-maker. She smiled, and answered, "I don't think it's my goal to be No. 1 in the world. What matters to me most is this market." She gestured around her, at China. Outside the cafeteria, we could hear the sound of semitrucks on the rutted road leading to the factory. And from the window the red-and-white striped smokestack of the company's power plant was visible, towering above everything around it.

Fruit was served, and Cheung attacked a small pile of longans, pulling them from their skins, one at a time. Perhaps it was fatigue, but, as she ate, her usually impregnable optimism seemed muted. "I think the market is going down so fast that some won't be able to turn it around," she said.

She went on, "This time is really different. Large and small are all affected. In the past, the big waves would only wash away the sand and leave the rocks. Now the waves are so big, even some rocks are being washed away." ♦

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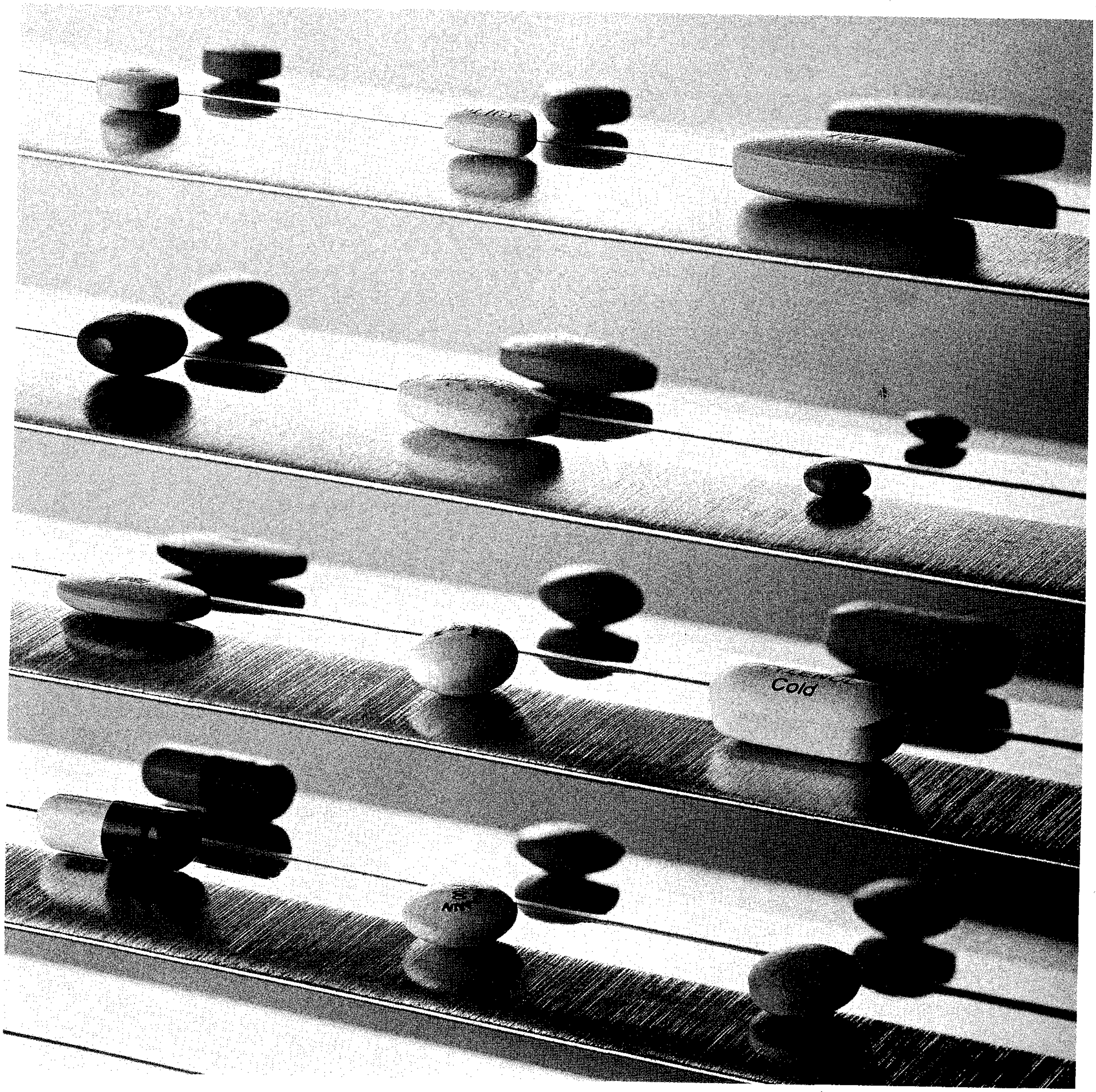
An audio interview with Evan Osnos.

FICTION

JULIA AND BYRON

BY CRAIG RAINE



When Julia was twenty-nine, her hair was already bar-coded. Now, at sixty-two, it was a solid helmet of bright pewter, level with her lean, brown jawbone. As she looked at her wedding ring, she could observe the bold play of tendons on the back of her tanned thin hands. The student doctor was telling her that she had cancer. Of the bone marrow.

He had found her reading her file—left on the desk by the consultant—and assumed that she already knew the diagnosis. Perhaps he thought her doctorate in zoology was a doctorate in medicine. He wanted to be nice. "Myeloma. Broad term, actually. In your case," he gestured at the crisp yellow folder on which her hands were resting, "it's serious—well, it's always serious—but not hopeless."

His fingernails were clean and cut short. She liked that.

And he wasn't entirely wrong about her medical knowledge. After the initial tests, she'd done some reading and asked various doctor friends a few questions. She'd looked on the Web. So she had a shrewd and accurate idea of her chances—two to five years, or, possibly, if her condition was stabilized, a longer, indeterminate period. She might reach seventy, with luck. Longer if she was luckier.

When the consultant, Aaronovitch, returned and proposed to take her into his confidence, she pretended complete ignorance—to protect the student doctor and to hear the fullest possible account of her illness. Aaronovitch's diagnosis differed from the student doctor's in no significant particular.

"I should tell you, Mr. Aaronovitch," Julia said, "what you couldn't possibly know unless you've got my G.P.'s notes from way back—that my blood count has always been very low. I mean, before all this. When I was well. So I'd say that I may be less ill than I look. On paper. So to speak."

Her acute hearing picked up the sound of his hairy hand palpating his chin. The sound of static. To show Julia that he was thinking. Considering. Weighing. Being judicious. Finally, he folded his arms across his waistcoat, leaned back in his chair, inclined his head a little, looked directly into Julia's eyes—and proposed the experimental treatment that he had been contemplating for six months before the onset of her symptoms had brought her to his hospital.

"In that case," he said, "blood to make up the count, and chemo. One pill a month. That's all. New thing. Massively powerful, of course. But definitely worth a try. Might just do the trick." He clicked his Montblanc Rollerball twice.

They looked each other in the eye.

"They sent for some doctors / In sneezles / And wheezles," Julia said gravely. "To tell them what ought / To be done."

Mr. Aaronovitch lifted a quizzical eyebrow.

"All sorts and conditions / Of famous physicians / Came hurrying round / At a run," Julia answered, without smiling. "You're the expert, that's all."

The medication had a beautiful name. Mandragorax. Made by a pharmaceutical company that knew its Shakespeare.

In six months it had completely stripped the nerves of her hands. She could feel nothing.

After the failure of Mandragorax to do anything except damage Julia, Mr. Aaronovitch adopted more conventional treatment—a gradualist chemotherapy, administered by IV and closely monitored in the hospital over half a day and a night. Julia endured nausea and massive temperature fluctuations—her green hospital shift black with sweat and vacuum-packed against her scalded body. But no hair loss.

She began to stabilize. She played tennis. She swam.

Here she is, her skin the reddish-brown of bresaola, trapping tennis balls between racquet and foot, crooking her knee, patting the plush. Here is the sweat shadow left by her hand on the red leather racquet handle. So tanned that her eyelids are pale if—*pain*—she closes her eyes. Here she is, bald—lifting the squeaky flap of her white rubber bathing hat to tuck out of sight strands of her livid hair. Folds, a cape of chlorinated water, gather at her neck as she strokes down the pool in little pulses, touches with two hands together, and turns in an eddy. She is a burglar in her black goggles and striped bathing costume. In the changing room, she hooks a finger under the rubber helmet and shakes her hair free. Bright gray, damp at the tips.

Mr. Aaronovitch was surprised by her comparative recovery, surprised that her immune system was still operational and effective, given its virtual extinction a few months before. He persuaded Julia to take part in another experiment. His argument was calculated to appeal to her scientific instinct. Though unlikely to succeed in the short term, the new treatment might be valuable in the long term. Julia's proven powers of recuperation suggested to Aaronovitch that this new course of chemo, though carrying a significant risk, was unlikely to be fatal. Its development, the necessary crucial refinements, however, depended on the use of a human guinea pig.

Julia thought of her beloved lab rats—the healthy and sleek, the medicated and ungainly, carrying their single tumors like Quasimodo, their double tumors like Bactrians. And she signed the contract with Mr. Aaronovitch's Montblanc Rollerball. *Click-click.* The contract promised that antibiotics would not be withheld.

In the event, they were withheld. "If you could just hang in there a little bit longer, Julia." Mr. Aaronovitch had stopped calling her Dr. Duddington when she had stopped being his patient and become, as it were, a colleague, on the signing of the contract.

Here she is in her hospital gown—too tired to tie the telltails behind her. Her buttocks have vanished. You can see her coccyx. There is hair all over her body. She can hardly make her jaws move to eat. Her throat is so ulcerated that swallowing is impossible. An amber mosaic. Her tongue is black-indigo. She cannot keep food down.

Talking is difficult. So many movements required that it takes her ten minutes, with rests between every whispered word, to say the first line of "They all made a note / Of the state of her throat." It is so painful for Julia that Byron, her husband, *tries* to complete the second line as soon as he recognizes the quotation. But he fails at the pronoun—his? her?—and is so upset he has to leave the room.

When Mr. Aaronovitch agreed at last to the suspension of treatment and

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the resumption of antibiotics, she was unable to take them orally. Byron had to push the suppositories up her rectum, taking gobs and shreds of flesh with them.

She bled from her vagina and rectum and, as she declined, began to soil herself. At the end, she was very weak and found it hard to walk. Byron took her upstairs, holding her thin hands. Her face was very pale, so pale she looked as if she were wearing lipstick.

He said, "You're very weak. You're finding it hard to walk."

She smiled and water came out of her mouth and she died in his arms.

After the undertaker had left, Byron kissed her and realized how dead she was. She had gone. She wasn't there. But he couldn't put the lid on the coffin. After three days, the molded symmetrical smile began to pull to one side. It began to look more like a smirk. He wondered if he should turn off the central heating all over the house, not just in the spare room.

Byron was unable to sleep, so he sat in Julia's study, in the kneeling chair, working his way through the diaries she had kept in a beige filing cabinet. They recorded his bad behavior during their twenty-year marriage. Where were the tender moments? Unrecorded. He read on, compelled, remorseful, weeping, nodding off now and then, only to be woken by his own sobs. "B impossible. Drunk at Encaenia garden party. Told principal everyone bisexl. Sodomized at Central School S & D: enjoyed it. Explained that proximity of prostate to rectum wall accounts for male pleasure. Only drawback loose stools next morning. But that wd apply to wm also. In car I sd: B, why do you do this? What? What do I do? Make things up. You're like a kid. Anything to be center of attentn. Fuck off. Rather be fucked up arse by poofter than service you."

All his jealousies, all his tantrums, all his sulks were here in the diaries, written up like experiments, in Julia's methodical notation. And only Byron knew that these episodes were oblique expressions of his love for her. They had no children. She had been forty when they married and was committed to her career. Sometimes she'd joked that she had a daughter called Trilobites. So children had been out of the question—which had suited him fine—but he'd got into the habit of creating a scene whenever he felt her concentration falter, flicker, withdraw. Byron had wanted her attention undivided.

He had succeeded. "Dread B's rants. Think about them all time. Back of my mind all time. Hates me. Why?" He found no expressions of love.

"I stripped the nerves of her heart," he would say in the street to any of their mutual friends. "I was the chemo before the chemo. So domineering, so rude, so impossible. Christ, you should read her diaries. You find out. You think, She knows I care. But you find out she doesn't. She doesn't know. I tortured her."

And he would stand there crying, even after the friend had escaped. He didn't burst into tears. He was already in tears as soon as he saw anyone who had known her. "I never learn. I never fucking learn, do I? Even the funeral. Even that. I made all the guests go in the Land Rover. And I made a fucking scene. I was embarrassing."

He had gone on all of Julia's field trips with her in the Land Rover. At the graveside, there was a freak summer hailstorm. Byron's black tie was pasted to his shirt. His face was so wet you couldn't tell how hard he was crying. He took out a copy (with worn corners) of "Now We Are Six" and tried to read "Us Two." The first stanza was a fight for control, looking away from the wet page, lips parted and dripping. The hailstones thrashed and popped. Where the clay began, the earth looked like tiger stone. Then everything seemed to speed up, until the final stanza—which took a lifetime because Byron's mouth became suddenly difficult and stiff.

So wherever I am, there's always Pooh,
There's always Pooh and Me.
"What would I do," I said to Pooh,
"If it wasn't for you," and Pooh said:
   "True,
It isn't much fun for One, but Two
Can stick togeth . . .

The slewed mouth of a stroke victim.

Byron flung himself on the wet coffin, which slipped out of his embrace and dropped a wreath of chrysanthemums. He fell. One knee was muddied, and somehow his nose began to bleed.

For two years he was a grief Automat, crying unstoppably at the mention of her name. Then he remarried—a younger woman—and was a difficult husband. ◆

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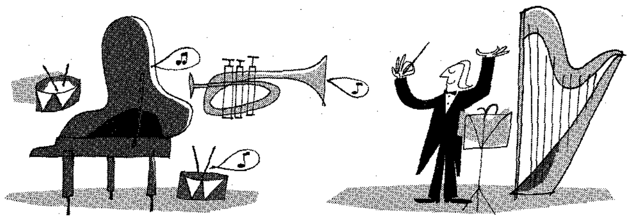


THE THEATRE

TURF WARS

"West Side Story" and "God of Carnage" on Broadway.

BY JOHN LAHR

"West Side Story" (at the Palace, under the sure-handed direction of Arthur Laurents, who wrote the musical's original book) is so exciting it makes you ache with pleasure. All the defining forces of the American fifties—velocity, mobility, confidence—are condensed into this superb retelling of the Romeo and Juliet legend, which plays out against the background of Latino-versus-Anglo gang violence. Like the tail fins on fifties American cars or the parabolic shapes of Populuxe furniture, "West Side Story" incarnates the dream of momentum in the golden age of the twentieth century. Everything about the show is streamlined: the fluid jolt of Jerome Robbins's choreography; the exhilarating syncopation of Leonard Bernstein's symphonic score; the bravura concision of Stephen Sondheim's lyrics; the swiftness of Laurents's storytelling—the book is one of the shortest in the history of the musical. The début of the show, in 1957—a production I saw—also marked the moment when the musical asserted its right to treat just about any subject (murder, rape, bigotry) as grist for popular entertainment. "West Side Story" is somehow both airborne and transcendent.

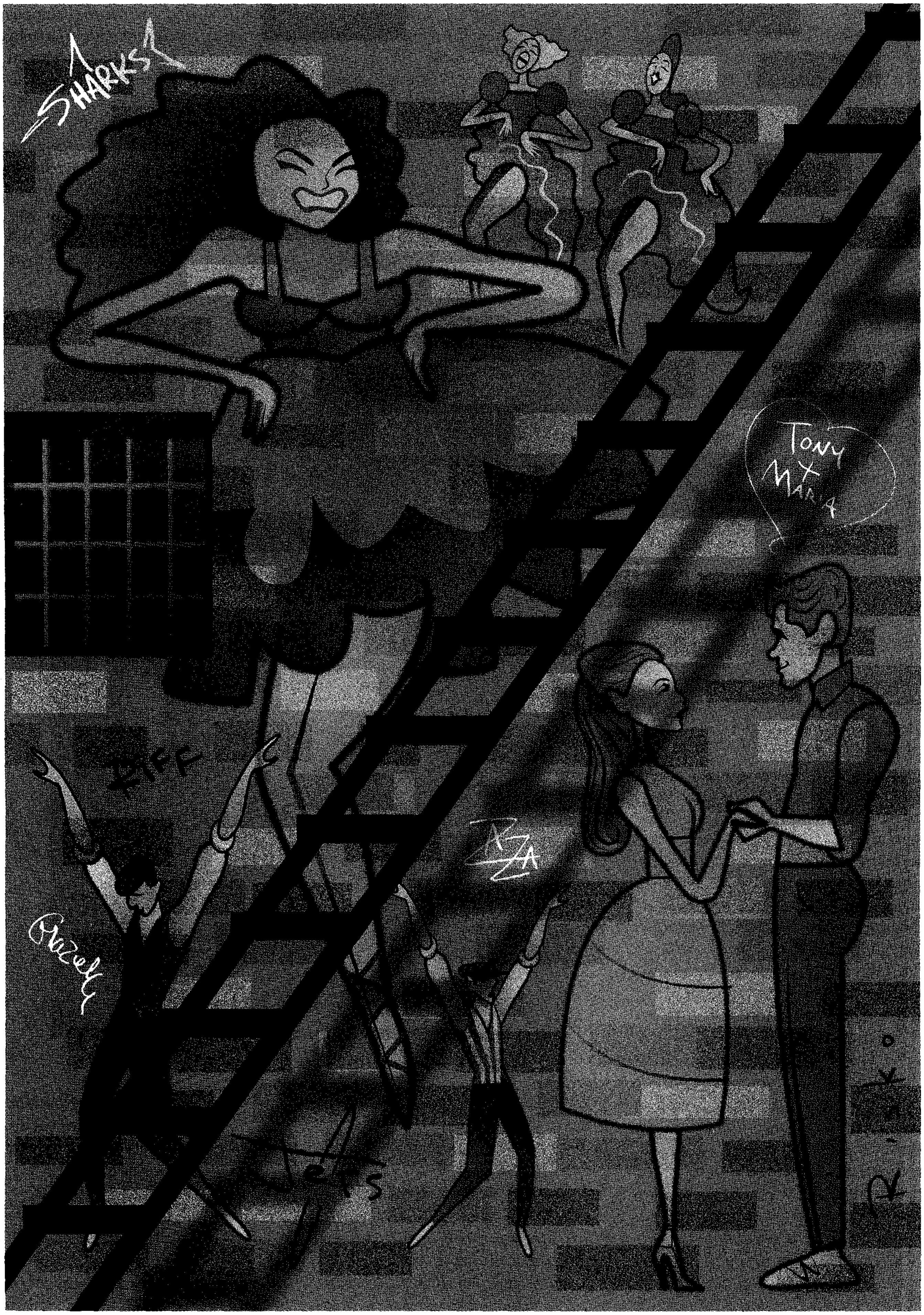
When a show succeeds, especially if it involves a collaboration, the story of its origins becomes the greatest fiction of all. Bernstein called "West Side Story" "my baby"; Robbins, to whom no one was speaking by opening night, signalled his imperialism over the enterprise by contractually requiring a box around his billing in every production of the show. Now the ninety-one-year-old Laurents is laying his claim to ownership: in this bold makeover, the story rules. From the musical's first beats—which tone down the finger-snapping thrust of Bernstein's signature prologue with pauses that allow us to take in the individual gang members—Laurents announces his intention to leave his fingerprints on the classic. They don't smudge its beauty; in fact, his attempts to heighten the show's realism only enhance it. In his version, the gang members actually look like teen-agers; the Latina chorus girls are not Broadway beautiful; the costumes (by David C. Woolard) and set designs (by James Youmans) explore the subtle, shadowy ranges of a color palette that takes the show away from glitzy spectacle and toward a grittier, more muted stylization. By eliminating blackouts between scenes, Laurents also adds to the story's tension. The evening as a whole feels sculpted—no gesture, no word, no visual choice is arbitrary or wasted. Laurents's most innovative touch is to have the Puerto Ricans sometimes speak and sing in Spanish. Fifty years on, in a multicultural America, this decision makes the production feel fresh; it also allows the show to dispense with some of Sondheim's rookie mistakes. In "I Feel Pretty," for instance, he had Maria, an uneducated Puerto Rican teen-ager, only a month in New York, singing with such showy internal rhymes as "It's alarming how charming I feel." ("When rhyme goes against character, out it should go," Sondheim said in 1974, with the wisdom of years.)

It is Laurents's great good fortune to have found for his tale of star-crossed love the radiant Josefina Scaglione, a twenty-one-year-old Argentinian, who is at once fine-voiced and sweet-faced. She is plausibly a teen-ager and absolutely a star. Unlike many North American ingénues, who are technically expert but internally vacant, Scaglione is a whole person. Passionate, playful, and demure, she sings out of a centered, secure notion of womanhood. When Tony (the excellent Matt Cavenaugh) spots Maria at the local high-school dance—one of Joey McKneely's many sensational reproduced choreographic moments—he is instantly under her spell, and we are, too. Scaglione's innocence and sweetness are underlined by the shrewd casting of the rollicking Karen Olivo as Maria's older confidante, Anita, who is also the flamboyant, knowing girlfriend of Maria's brother, Bernardo (George Akram), whom Tony accidentally stabs during a gang dustup. With such a sweeping canvas, the musical's characterizations are necessarily two-dimensional; the actors must bring a vivid sense of personality to their roles. Here, for the most part, they succeed.

As "West Side Story" hurtles to its inevitable tragic conclusion, the audience is treated to astonishing moments of stagecraft. We enter the hubbub of the school dance, for instance, through a sort of hanging garden of paper roses. We watch the final playground fight through a chain-link fence that drops down between us and the lethal skirmish—a trope that both magnifies the authenticity of the horror and forces the audience to focus on the story's outcome. When Maria discovers her dead lover, the moment is like a punch to the heart.

A rumble of an altogether different kind takes place in the French playwright Yasmina Reza's dark and hilarious farce "God of Carnage" (elegantly directed by Matthew Warchus, at the Bernard B. Jacobs), which in Christopher Hampton's excellent translation has been relocated from Paris to the comfortable

Gangs of New York: Karen Olivo, Josefina Scaglione, and Matt Cavenaugh star in Arthur Laurents's bold revival.


SHARKS
RIFF
TONY + MARIA
JETS

ROBERT RISKO; OPPOSITE: LENE DUEJENSEN

upper-middle-class environs of Cobble Hill, Brooklyn. In a handsomely minimal haute-bourgeois apartment (designed by Mark Thompson), a turf war takes place over a blood-red carpet, a coffee table chockablock with art books, and two elegant glass vases overflowing with white tulips. Instead of the Jets and the Sharks, the Novaks (Marcia Gay Harden and James Gandolfini) and the Raleighs (Hope Davis and Jeff Daniels) face off over the loutish playground behavior of their kids. Michael and Veronica Novak's aggrieved eleven-year-old son Henry has had two teeth knocked out by Alan and Annette Raleigh's son, Benjamin. "Madame, our son is a savage," Alan, a cell-phone-addicted model of glib Gallic cynicism, explains. "To hope for any kind of spontaneous repentance would be fanciful." Where the upper classes of the turn of the last century fought with property, these vindictive twenty-first-century *Homo sapiens* fight with principle. "I don't see the point of existence without some kind of moral conception of the world," Veronica, who is publishing a book on Darfur, says. She believes, she adds, "in the soothing powers of culture." In ninety minutes of sustained mayhem, however, Reza wipes the masks of sang-froid off her whole monstrous regiment and demonstrates just how thin a line lies between civility and barbarity.

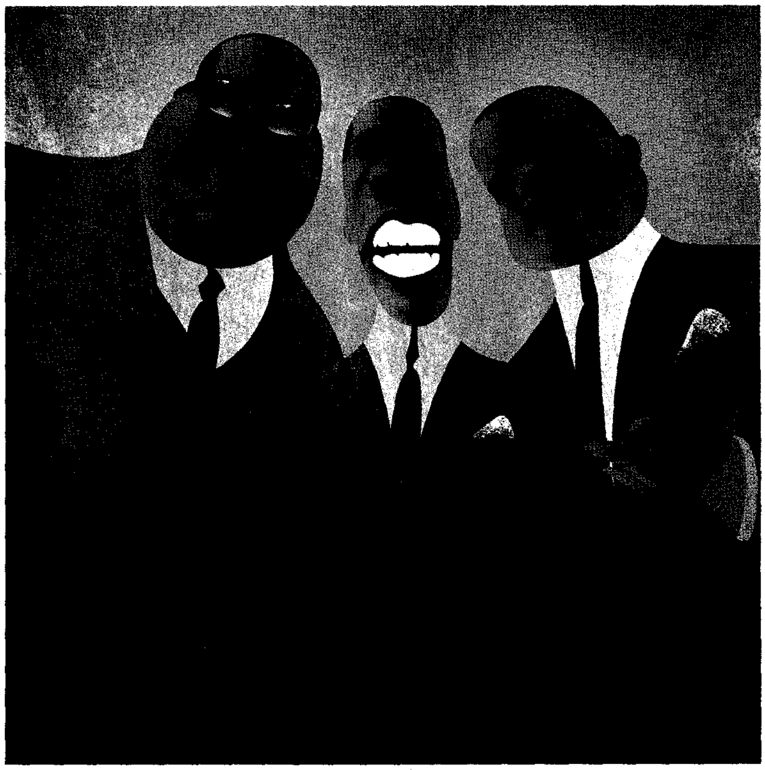
Henry, it turns out, leads a school gang. "That's terrific," Michael says at the news, "because I had my own gang." Spoken by James Gandolfini—forever preserved in public memory as Tony Soprano—the line gets a big, unearned laugh. But Gandolfini, who brilliantly manages his character's arc from genteel to goniff, earns every moment of Reza's fun. He is a huge guy, whose size is as imposing as the brooding melancholy that makes him a dangerous presence. When Alan drops bits of clafoutis on the carpet—"I have no manners," he says—Michael watches him from the sofa in electrifying silence, like an alligator eyeing an egret. As events spiral out of control, allegiances shift, and fissures open up in both marriages. Lubricated by rum, Michael's nihilism, like Annette's projectile vomit—yes, you read correctly—is a "brutal and catastrophic spray." He attacks everything, from marriage ("the most terrible ordeal God can inflict on you") to Darfur ("Sudanese coons"); his fine fury is sidesplitting. "I can't keep this bullshit up anymore!" he roars. "I am not a member of polite society. What I am, and always have been, is a fucking Neanderthal." At some point, driven beyond endurance, Veronica, her hair bobbing, her arms flying, throws herself onto Michael's massive back and pummels him on the sofa. "She's a supporter of peace and stability in the world," he says.

As Annette, Hope Davis is an elegant package of repressed nastiness. Her revenge is served hot: what she does to her husband's cell phone and those luxurious tulips raises the stakes of farcical anarchy just about as high as they can go without someone calling the police. As Freud tells us in "Civilization and Its Discontents," we have to repress our infantile aggression in order for civilization to survive. But it's worth paying top dollar to see those feelings acted out by an expert ensemble. And no bleating about the cruelty of farce, please. As Reza knows and so gleefully shows, without a killing there is no feast. ♦

THE RACE CARD

Tracey Scott Wilson on the civil-rights movement.

BY HILTON ALS



Calloway, McClarin, and McClain in "The Good Negro."

ANDRÉ CARRILHO

I don't know if James Baldwin's 1964 drama "Blues for Mister Charlie" was on Tracey Scott Wilson's mind when she was writing her new play, "The Good Negro" (at the Public), but I couldn't stop thinking of the older work as I watched Wilson's characters grapple with the same themes that made Baldwin's characters so one-dimensional: the confluence of racism, carnal desire, religious hypocrisy, and the civil-rights movement. In "Notes for Blues," the introduction to the script of his long and didactic spectacle, Baldwin writes that "Blues for Mister Charlie" was inspired by the murder of the black teenager Emmett Till, in Mississippi, in 1955. Still, the play had a tortured history of its own. Baldwin may have initially conceived of the project as an argument in support of integration. ("I believe . . . that all men are brothers," he wrote in his "Notes.") During the play's development, however, when he considered making his script more balanced, he was pressed by several people involved in the Black Power movement to take advantage of the opportunity—a Broadway show—to expose the atrocities of racism. Baldwin caved, and produced a piece of theatre that is little more than crude agitprop. (The fictional Southern town where the action takes place is named Plaguetown—"The plague is race, the plague is our concept of Christianity," Baldwin writes—and the stage is divided between Blacktown and Whitetown.) In the final scene of "Blues for Mister Charlie," Lyle Britten, a murderous white racist wielding a gun, is berated by Richard Henry, the son of a black minister:

> You sick mother! Why can't you leave me alone? White man! I don't want nothing from you. You ain't got nothing to give me. You can't eat because none of your sad-assed chicks can cook. You can't talk because won't nobody talk to you. You can't dance because you've got nobody to dance with—don't you know I've watched you all my life? *All my life!*

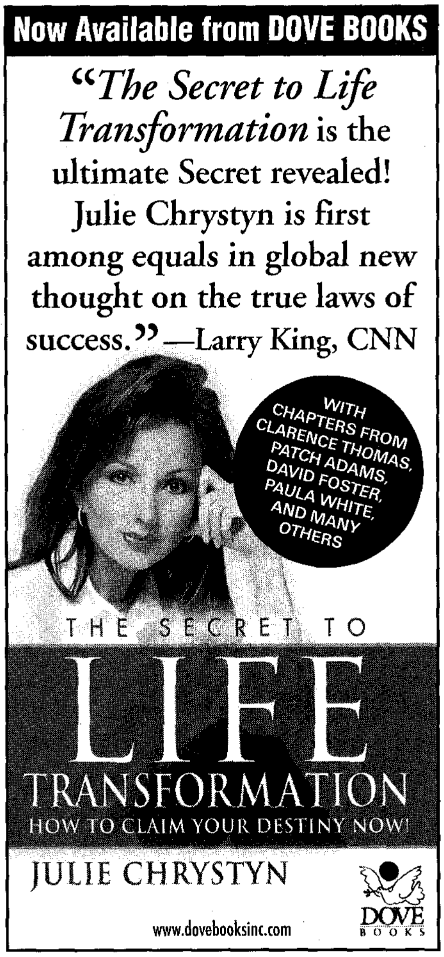
Of course, such self-righteousness has to play against its presumed opposite: hillbilly histrionics. "I had to kill him," Lyle says. "I'm a white man! Can't nobody talk that way to *me!*"

This nearly laughable non-exchange—the characters lecture more than they converse—is more or less where "The Good Negro" begins. Here Lyle is called Gary Thomas Rowe, Jr. (Erik Jensen). He's a virulent racist, straight out of the "Mandingo" school of Southern grotesques, who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1962. A caricature of a redneck, he grabs the arm of a black woman, Claudette Sullivan (Joniece Abbott-Pratt), as she tries to get past him in a department store. She's rushing to fetch her four-year-old daughter, who is using a rest room reserved for white women. (The rest room for "colored" women is out of order.) Claudette explains that she couldn't let her daughter "go on the floor like a dog," but Rowe doesn't want to hear it. He's making a citizen's arrest—Claudette is nothing more than a disobedient "nigger" whose further oppression will feed his scarecrow ego.

In Wilson's 2003 play, "The Story," a fascinating meditation on journalistic ethics, the characters walked off the stage when their scenes ended. In "The Good Negro," which has a more complicated structure, characters stay in place once they've spoken, and mime their interactions in the background as the lights go up on another scene. (The actors enter and depart from all four sides of the raked stage.) After Claudette is carted off by a cop, the spotlight turns to James Lawrence (Curtis McClarin), a "fiery" black preacher, based on Martin Luther King, Jr., who is trying to organize blacks to fight segregation. I put "fiery" in quotation marks because that's the way Wilson's characters talk and act—as if they were types, quotations from elsewhere, not people. James has a "sidekick," Henry Evans (J. Bernard Calloway), a lascivious organizer who's jealous of another organizer, Bill Rutherford (Leroy McClain), who has come from Europe to help James in the struggle. But Bill can't quite hang out with James and Henry—he's too prim to be one of the boys, and not quite "black" enough—so he becomes the play's ultimate outsider. (He is James's superego, and Henry is his id.)

As directed by Liesl Tommy, the play's various plots and subplots move along with a kind of cinematic ease (though they are sometimes bogged down by Wilson's dialogue, which is used more often to make a point than to reveal the inner lives of the characters). But halfway through this nearly three-hour production you start to wonder if there's anything you'll want to take away from it in the end, especially given that you can already see how everything *will* end. Naturally, Claudette's case becomes a cause célèbre, and, naturally, James uses Claudette as a symbol of abused black womanhood—even as he himself seduces and then abandons her. Wilson could just as easily have called this play "The Story," too, given that no one in it tells the truth.

Lies, deceit, white masks covering black skin: these are Wilson's themes. While "The Story" was about the corrosive effect of class expectations on a young black woman, who, among other things, wants to "marry up" to a white man, it wasn't about *acting* black or its tired corollary, *being* white. "The Good Negro" has no protagonists or antagonists to speak of, because it's not about people; it's about race as an empty trope that uncritical theatregoers can fill with their own pat expectations concerning black and white, men and women, history and the present. ♦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A CRITIC AT LARGE

WAITING

Samuel Beckett's life in letters.

BY ANTHONY LANE

At the end of January, 1958, the first American production of Samuel Beckett's "Endgame" opened, at the Cherry Lane Theatre. The idea of Beckett playing on Commerce Street is rich in irony, and the director, Alan Schneider, and his cast would have been all too aware of the fate that had befallen "Waiting for Godot" when that play received its national première, two years earlier. Advertised, perhaps unwisely, as "the laugh sensation of two continents," "Godot" had opened at the Coconut Grove Playhouse, in Miami, and closed after two weeks, having led some viewers to inquire if one of the continents in question had been Antarctica. Beckett himself had been not just stoical but positively braced, as was made clear in a letter to Schneider:

> Success and failure on the public level never mattered much to me, in fact I feel much more at home with the latter, having breathed deep of its vivifying air all my writing life up to the last couple of years.

Such can be the privilege of a poet and prose writer, especially one with ambitions as fearsome and uningratiating as Beckett's; but it is small comfort to anyone in the theatre business, and Schneider was determined that the first-night fiasco of "Godot" was not to be repeated. With that in mind, he sent queries to the author about various cruces in the text, to which Beckett responded in detail; his replies covered everything from pre-Socratic philosophers to brands of dog biscuit. Thus equipped, Schneider prepared an article on "Endgame," to be printed in the *Times* on the weekend before the opening. The idea was to soften the ground for nervous newcomers, and incorporate some of Beckett's advisory comments, from his correspondence with Schneider. The author was not pleased. "I do not like publication of letters," he wrote Schneider. (The *Times* never ran the piece.) Later that year, Beckett toughened his position: "I prefer those letters not to be republished and quite frankly, dear Alan, I do not want any of my letters to anyone to be published anywhere, either in the *petit pendant* or the long *après*." And here we are, more than half a century after the dog biscuits, with the *petit pendant*—the little now—dead and gone, and the long thereafter in full swing, and what do we find? Seven hundred pages of Beckett's letters, nearly three pounds in weight, with another three bricks to come.

For a man of few words, Beckett wrote an awful lot of them. To date, some fifteen thousand letters have been found, and, from that trove, the more pertinent have now been plucked. The question is, to what do they pertain? First came "No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider," published in 1998, nine years after the author's death, and revolving mostly around the staging of the plays. This month, we have "The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929-1940" (Cambridge; $50), edited by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, who, in an introduction, give us the lowdown: "The four volumes of selected letters will present about 2,500 letters with another 5,000 quoted in the annotations." As for the criteria by which that selection has been arrived at, it was Beckett himself who laid the trail, in 1985. Reasoning, perhaps, that if it were done then 'twere well it were done by those who take trouble, he reconsidered his stubborn stance of the nineteen-fifties and authorized an edition of his correspondence. The editing, he explained, would involve "its reduction to those passages only having bearing on my work." That sounds so simple, but the ambiguity is fiendish enough to keep the hounds confused. How, for instance, does the following bear on his work?

> When I've posted this I'll go & have a Turkish bath & stupefy my nerves in sweaty duration. My person is developing dirty habits.

The editors' footnote to this letter of 1931 is hygienically exact: "At this time, Trinity College Dublin did not have bathing facilities; the Turkish bath on Lincoln Place and another on Leinster Street were the two nearest to TCD." That is good to know, but, still, where does "my person" end and the business of writing begin? Should we adhere to a Cartesian division of the two, or is it not more honest to admit that the making of literature, at the nib's end, is not so much a noble calling as one of the "dirty habits" to which an author is compelled, no more or less mysterious than the call of the bathroom or the temptations of the fridge? When the letter was written, Beckett was twenty-four, in the first stirrings of his creative prose, and about to plunge into "Dream of Fair to Middling Women," the headlong novel that he completed the following year. Its hero, Belacqua, who reappeared in "More Pricks Than Kicks," Beckett's 1934 collection of linked tales, is a fetid fellow: "He sat not looking, his head sunk, plucking vaguely at his filthy old trousers." He is, in short, a precursor of those who populate the books of Beckett's maturity: the encased, the unwashed, the mendicant, and all those curled up as if against the onset of a kicking. So, yes, maybe that "sweaty duration" of 1931 is of scholarly interest after all.

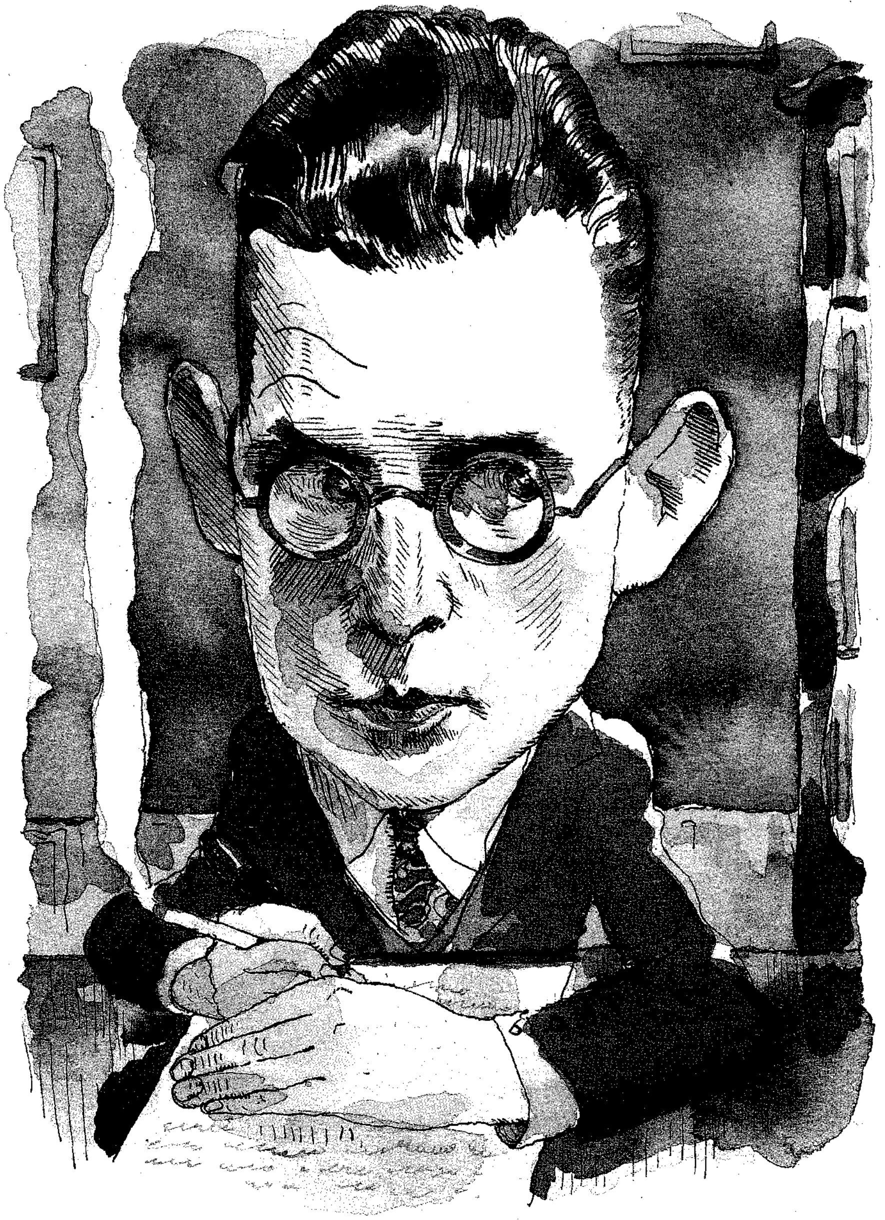
In which case, why start this volume in 1929? There are no reports here from Beckett's boyhood; nothing from his well-to-do rearing in a middle-class Protestant home in Dublin, or his attendance at Portora Royal School, a boarding school in County Fermanagh, where he excelled not just academically but in sports, too—rugby, swimming, boxing, and cricket. In 1923, he moved on to Trinity College Dublin. From there, too, one imagines, he would have written letters home: to his mother, May, his father, William, or his beloved brother, Frank. But, if they have survived, they are not in this book; is it really an impertinence to wish that they were? The events, or the peaceful non-events, of a writer's first two decades can do more than the impress of adult life to forge and brand the published work, and Beckett is no exception—as someone who wrote a study of Proust, in 1931, he was well versed in the unearthing of a buried young self. Much of his later work harks back to earlier years, even if the harking is riven with pain or regret; "Company," for instance, from 1980, recasts a fitful set of incidents from Beckett's farthest past, as he confessed to his authorized biographer, James Knowlson. Even one letter from that time, as plain as can be, would have been invaluable—a godsend, you might say, although Beckett would have disputed the existence of the sender. He was once asked, when testifying in a libel case, whether he was a Christian, a Jew, or an atheist. "None of the three," he replied.

As it is, our story begins in 1929. It is a peripatetic one: Beckett, having triumphed in examinations and graduated from Trinity College Dublin, at the end of 1927, taught first in a Belfast school and then in Paris as a lecturer in English at the École Normale Supérieure, which is far more superior than normal. He also met Joyce, reading aloud to him in his gathering blindness, and contributing to a book of essays on "Finnegans Wake." In 1930, Beckett returned to Trinity as a lecturer in French; his parents would have been as proud of this prestigious appointment as they were aghast when he resigned from it, in January, 1932, slipping the moorings of a regular profession in favor of more uncertain waters. Henceforth, his time was split largely between Dublin, Paris, and London, with a spell in Germany from the fall of 1936 to the spring of the following year. The year 1938 was notable for the publication of his first novel, "Murphy," and for a French pimp by the misleading name of Prudent, who stabbed Beckett in the street, just missing the heart. "I don't know why, sir, I'm sorry," he said, when his victim inquired about a motive. When war was declared, on September 3, 1939, Beckett was with his mother in Ireland, which was and would remain a neutral country. The next day, he returned to France.

Laid upon this bare outline, in the course of the letters, is a palimpsest of all the other things that Beckett could have done, or sought to do, but never did. He put in for lectureships at Cape Town and Milan, though with little expectation, or even hope, of success. "Now that I have assembled testimonials," he wrote of the South African plan, in 1937, "I am in a position to abstain from applying." He also toyed with the notion of becoming an airline pilot. How any of his passengers could have been confident of reaching their destination, or indeed of taking off in the first place, is open to grave debate, but Beckett was bent on flying:

> I hope I am not too old to take it up seriously, nor too stupid about machines to qualify as a commercial pilot. I do not feel like spending the rest of my life writing books that no one will read. It is not as though I wanted to write them.

Three months beforehand, in March, 1936, he had written—and this is hard to believe, even as one reads it—to Sergei Eisenstein, in Moscow, confessing to an interest in "the scenario and editing end" of cinema. "I am anxious to make contact with your mastery of these, and beg you to consider me a serious cinéaste worthy of admission to your school," he added. There was no reply, and we are left to ponder what unholy offspring might have resulted from their collaboration, and what the director of "Battleship Potemkin" would have made of Beckett's hope that "the industrial film will become so completely naturalistic, in stereoscopic colour and gramophonic sound, that a


Beckett thought about escaping the writing life and becoming a pilot or a filmmaker.

BARRY BLITT

back water may be created for the two-dimensional silent film that had barely emerged from its rudiments when it was swamped."

SO, SO IT BEGINS MEANS IT BEGINS

And so it begins, Mickey, birthday cake (party), special
Night, whoops, and take a box.
So it begins, take a bow, hold your head up,
Scowl now. This is your own guitar.

Stop and see a movie.
Stop and see whether the eagle holds up at the end.
I'm leaving. See how I pull the door to.
The door is the floor and it's rising up,

Below is a dungeon. It's all you can see in the dark.
There is graffiti on the wall.
The bugle has ceded its call to power.
It's the time when we are waiting to be told.

Nothing is getting better. And nothing is getting worse.
A duck and a mouse. A house and a hat.
Having lunch and having a medal of honor.
Let's put our culture on a cartoon's.

Why not? Have the mouse answer the phone.
Have the receiver click. Then the real comes to
Its awful end. That point where, as he said, all came in
"With the shoutmost shoviality. Agog" Agog.

—*Mary Jo Bang*

As has been documented elsewhere, Beckett also devoted extensive thought and reading to a play about Dr. Johnson; in particular, about his long companionship with Hester Thrale and the fracture between them caused by her being widowed and remarried—"she had none of that need to suffer, or necessity of suffering, that he had," Beckett remarks in a letter of 1937. He filled three notebooks with preparations for the play, "Human Wishes," of which fewer than twelve pages were eventually composed. But it was not time wasted, because the modern melancholic had found a kindred low spirit, someone equally mortified by the ease with which life could waste away. The Johnson to whom he was drawn was not the "snappy or wisecracky" Doctor who emerged, he thought, from the "wit and wisdom machine" of Boswell but the "tragic figure" that we find in the more private reckonings: "there can hardly have been many so completely at sea in their solitude as he was or so horrifiedly aware of it," Beckett writes to his great friend Thomas McGreevy, adding, "Read the *Prayers & Meditations* if you don't believe me." Do what Beckett says, and you come upon passages like this: "A kind of strange oblivion has overspread me, so that I know not what has become of the last year; and perceive that incidents and intelligence pass over me without leaving any impression." That is Johnson, in 1764, and the young Irishman of 1937, who in the same letter to McGreevy writes that "I am really indifferent about where I go or what I do, since I don't seem able to or want to write any more," has clearly stumbled along the same road of lassitude, and found himself in the same slough of self-disgust.

Johnson, though, whatever his terrors, had confidence in the language that he used to articulate them, whereas Beckett, coming after Joyce, was prey to a further fear—namely, the suspicion that the currency of common language was devalued, and thus no longer adequate to meet the case of his distress. "More and more my language appears to me like a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it," he wrote in 1937. He would have to forge something new, or dig into old hoards, as in this plaint from the year before: "I can't imagine anything worse than the mental marasmus, in which I totter & sweat." "Marasmus," which Dr. Johnson's Dictionary of 1755 defines as "a consumption, in which persons waste much of their substance," joins company in these letters with "quiptificates," "faex," "gress," and "desquamation"—Beckett was fond of the Latinate and the technical—as well as with more gracious inventions, such as "eyedew" for tears, or "daymare" for his waking life. He was also, even more than Joyce, an unrepenting scatologist, and we are treated to an endless, often tiresome flow of fecal puns, some of them embedded in prose too deeply mired in private nudges and expostulations to be enjoyable:

> My friends here esquivent the Bones for the more part, which means the bolus has gone home. What shall they say, my not even enemies. May it stick in their anus. "I am sure you were not born with a pop." But am I not sparkling? Then how should the birth be still? Sois calme, ô mon soûleur. Andersen was the byblow of a Frenchman from the Marne. Ça explique Dieu.

There are lighter equivalents elsewhere, but they are scarcely easier to fathom:

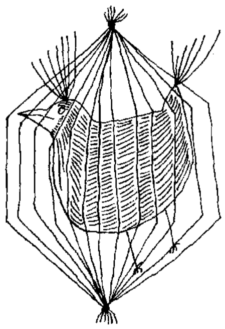
> Saw A. and B. last night. Napoleon Danton and Louis quatorzes red heels! Dining with Nancy tomorrow. She says Little Red Riddensnood is selling, but I don't believe her.

The editors try to soothe us with news that the Riddensnood refers to "Whoroscope," Beckett's prize-winning poem of 1930, but somehow that doesn't help. At moments like these, even hardened Beckettians may feel their thoughts drift toward the peerless parody of a typical writer's letter, as devised by James Thurber: "B— dropped in yesterday (Icky was out at the time) and gave some sort of report on Neddy but I am afraid I didn't listen (*ut ediendam aut debendo!*). He and Liddy are in Venice, I think I gathered, or Newport. What in the world do you suppose came over Buppa that Great Night???" Thurber even supplied some matching explanatory footnotes, such as "Probably Harry Boynton or his brother Norton." The first volume of the Beckett correspondence can do better than that: "It may have been Douglass ffrench-Mullen (1893-1943) who was boarding with Cissie Beckett in Moyne Road, Rathgar; Mt. Venus, near Woodtown, Co. Dublin, is a cromlech." You bet it is.

How, then, does one start to recommend this dense agglomeration of ire and indecision? Beckett was no Byron; nobody could maintain that the letters brim with a zest that exceeds the range of the printed works. A day spent with "Murphy" will give you a sharper, funnier portrait of the artist as a young man. Still, if you want to trace the tributaries of that book's mournful wit to their source, the letters are invaluable; the beautiful kite-flying scene that ends the novel—"the ludicrous fever of toys struggling skyward, the sky itself more and more remote, the wind tearing the awning of cloud to tatters"—is lifted from the elderly Londoners whom Beckett saw at the Round Pond in Kensington Gardens, doing much the same. He reported his vision to McGreevy in 1935: "They fly them almost out of sight, yesterday it was over the trees to the south, into an absolutely cloudless viridescent evening sky." The correspondent's phrasing has a natural, gusty soar to it, but the novel takes it higher.

This happens time and again in the letters, sometimes pointing to a leap of many years. When Beckett calls someone a morpion—originally a crab louse, and thus a term of irritated scorn—we are spirited ahead to Act II of "Godot," in which Estragon flicks the word at Vladimir. Likewise, we have always known that when Winnie, sifting through scraps of memory in "Happy Days," plucks out the words "beechen green," she is quoting Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"; but now we know that, three decades before, the playwright was admitting to McGreevy that "I like that crouching brooding quality in Keats—squatting on the moss, crushing a petal, licking his lips & rubbing his hands." The attraction, he added, lay in the "thick soft damp green richness" of the poems. These connections matter not just because they will excite the herds of hunter-gatherers who cluster, rather too zealously, around the field of Beckett studies but because, to any reader who can spare a little sweat, the prospect of "Word-storming in the name of beauty," as Beckett labels it here, is enough to quicken the heart—or, at any rate, what Hamm, in "Endgame," calls the "heart in my head."

What we have here is not historically uncommon: the early progress of an intensely clever, emotionally febrile figure, whose worries are further chafed by his dismay at seeing how directionless that progress feels. When Beckett turns to Schopenhauer (again, a traditional path), in 1930, it is for the philosopher's "intellectual justification of unhappiness—the greatest that has ever been attempted." There is more than a tinge of Goethe's Young Werther, who would have been lost without his sorrows; except that his were triggered by frustrated love, whereas the Beckett who stalks through these letters seems almost indecently loveless. True, there are fleeting mentions of his cousin Peggy Sinclair, to whom he had been close in the late nineteen-twenties. In "Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett," James Knowlson claims that she had "initiated, then led, their sexual explorations," and that Beckett's urge to explore further, with other women, is confirmed by "the less discreet parts" of his correspondence, but, if so, these have been filed away by the finer discretion of the editors. "I had a nice friendly postcard from Peggy from the North Sea" is about as stormy as we get. She died, of tuberculosis, less than three years later, earning a frighteningly austere tribute from Beckett to McGreevy: "It appears that she and her fiancé had lately been indulging in regular paroxysms of plans of what they would do when they were married. She has been cremated." The fiancé is said to be "inconsolable," although whether Beckett himself required consoling, or whether he was striving to present himself as someone with no such needs, is impossible to gauge.



The Beckett who appears before us, in other words, in his middle to late twenties is already fully formed in his *froideurs:* another reason for one's annoyance at the starting date of this edition, for one would dearly like to know if there was *ever* a time when his narrow-eyed distrust of worldly conventions—and what many of us would embrace as conventional pleasures—was not in place. "This life is terrible and I dont understand how it can be endured," he writes to McGreevy in 1930. "Quip—that most foul malady—Scandal & KINDNESS." Unpacked, this means two things. First, he was encountering the gossipy, keen-witted backchat of the Common Room at Trinity; and, second, he was living at home, in the Dublin suburb of Foxrock, while he taught. There are worse things than a family trying to be decent and encouraging toward its brilliant son, but, for Beckett, what he endured at Cooldrinagh—the family home, with its summerhouse, servants, and tennis court—was purgatorial.

What lit the flame, and never ceased to fuel it, was Beckett's relationship with his mother, May. All we glimpse here is the occasional flare; there is not a single letter addressed to her, but whether that absence is by editorial decree, or because the pages were lost or destroyed, there is no way of telling. One thing seems certain: without his mother's influence, some of Beckett's most consuming contributions to literature, including "Happy Days," "Company," and the short plays "Rockaby" and "Footfalls" (which has a character named May), would not exist. You do not have to construe all storytelling as memoir to be startled by the immediacy of "From an Abandoned Work," a curt masterpiece from 1957, whose first sentence reads, "Up bright and early that day, I was young then, feeling awful, and out, mother hanging out of the window in her nightdress weeping and waving." What we derive, from the letters, is a record of the anxiety attacks that descended on Beckett when he was under the same roof as May, and of the plentiful sessions of psychotherapy that he underwent in London, in the hope of a cure—sessions that were paid for by Mrs. Beckett. (A delicious circular irony, for Freudians who relish such things.) "Mother's whole idea of course is to get me committed to life here," he writes from Foxrock in 1936, the word "committed" dangerously poised between "dedicated" and "put away," as in a mental asylum. Very occasionally, he states the matter with a clarity that knocks the breath out of you: "I am what her savage loving has made me, and it is good that one of us should accept that finally." According to Knowlson, the explosion between them that preceded this confession (the details of the scene remain obscure) was sufficient to propel May away from the family home for a while, and Beckett away for good. Soon afterward, he moved to Paris.

Not all was crushed. "The only plane on which I feel my defeat not proven is the literary," he had written the previous year, and what renders this collection, for all its tics and indulgences, far more of a spur than a letdown is the slowly welling sense of a writer mustering his powers. The letters that stir me most are not those in which Beckett grapples with family tensions, or rues the indifference of publishers, but those which find him at recitals, in front of paintings, or drowned in a book. That is no mean affair; the only thing that separates the writer from ordinary folk—and, far from making him or her a better or wiser person, let alone a more amenable one, it can redouble the force of solitude, "one's ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness"—is that the reading of a poem, or the pondering of a Crucifixion, becomes an event. Not a diversion, a flight, or a release from chores but an experience no less transformative than a day in bed with a lover—especially if, as in Beckett's case, lovers were scarce. So it is, with unfeigned envy, that we find him in Berlin, in 1937, discerning "love's epilepsy" in a passage of Beethoven's "Leonore" Overture, or in London, in 1934, listening to the Busch Quartet play Beethoven's String Quartet No. 13, Op. 130, and hymning the "calm finality" of the Cavatina. (Almost forty years later, his play "Ghost Trio" would be folded around snatches of a Beethoven trio.) Beckett was blessed to be alive when regular concertgoers could catch performances by Vladimir Horowitz, Jacques Thibaud, and Alfred Cortot, or a production of Falla's "The Three-Cornered Hat" with set and costumes by Picasso and choreography by Massine. Being Beckett, of course, he did not always count those blessings, belittling the Cortot program as "a disappointment" and unleashing his sarcasm at the Berlin Philharmonic, under Wilhelm Furtwängler, when they came to London in 1934 and played Schumann's Fourth Symphony. Their 1953 performance of the same work is among the crown jewels of recorded sound, but to Beckett's ears the conductor was "murderous" with the score. "Mr Furtwängler, like the good Nazi he is, cannot tolerate mysteries," he wrote.

It was partly in pursuit of mysteries that Beckett travelled to Germany two years later. Some readers will be amazed at how seldom he stands back and surveys the wider convulsions of the society that he has entered. How could one be there, so close to war, and not see—or, at least, not record—any acts of repression or shows of force? Should we not blame the bespectacled Beckett for his short moral sight? The fact is that, at this juncture, his was still a fearful nature, his focus of interest tight, his spirits mounting only in the contemplation of the two-dimensional sublime; alone, he went from town to town, spending his days in galleries and sending back elaborate notes to McGreevy—on a self-portrait by Giorgione, for instance ("I visited him every day for a week"), and an Antonello da Messina, "the tiny figures of the quick in the background gossiping and making appointments, under a paradisal sky." (In the foreground is the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.) That was in Dresden, and Beckett surely came across the Caspar David Friedrich of "Two Men Contemplating the Moon" in the same gallery, and its near-twin in Berlin, but, if so, he failed to comment: a shame, since he would later concede that the composition they enshrine was a source for his pair of tramps in "Waiting for Godot."

Between the lines of art-historical notation, however, there was some registering of pressure. Beckett pursued (and sometimes found) modern German art, by painters such as Emil Nolde, that had been deemed degenerate by the Nazis and stored away from the eyes of a corruptible public. He also reported, in March, 1937, the "very terrified tone" of a Munich publisher from whom he attempted to buy a book of drawings that had been banned by the Bavarian Political Police. What we get, in other words, is the first hint of those engulfing shifts to which both his practical life and his consciousness would be subject in the coming years. This first volume ends in 1940; the last letter is dated June 10th, two days before he left Paris, and four days before the Germans arrived. Ahead lay Beckett's work for the French Resistance, which he dismissed as "boy-scout stuff," but which saw him barely escaping capture by the Gestapo when his cell of resisters was betrayed, and which later earned him the Croix de Guerre. Ahead, too, lay the decisive period in Saint-Lô, Normandy, where, in 1945, as part of an Irish Red Cross team, he worked to set up a hospital, in a place all but annihilated by the conflict. The desolation that he witnessed there, amid what the locals described as "the Capital of Ruins," furnished the heavy, littered landscapes of his most celebrated plays and his most uncompromising fiction, and the unhappiness bred by the war required no "intellectual justification." It was physically *there*, in bombed-out buildings, and it belonged to other souls, less fortunate than himself.

The youthful worrier of these compelling letters, who suggested that "the man condemned to death is less afraid than I," was not lying; Beckett was neither a poser nor a hysteric, and there was precious little peacetime under his mother's gaze. But from now on he would have friends condemned to real death, and would grow acquainted with forms of human behavior to which neither of his younger selves—the home-stricken solipsist and the frowning scholar—would have an answer. In a magnificent letter of 1932, to McGreevy, Beckett had chastised one of his own poems for being *facultatif*, or optional. It did not, he said, "represent a necessity." These letters are a quest for necessity—for what must be written about, at whatever cost. As the long book closes, the necessities loom; in that respect, Samuel Beckett, for once, had nothing to fear. ♦

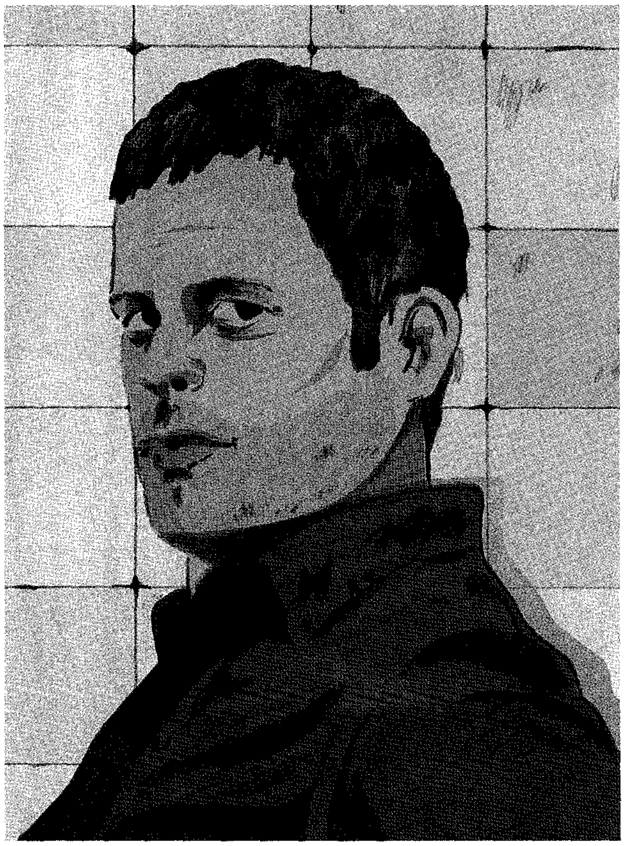
BOOKS

THE TUNNEL

In "Lowboy," a schizophrenic rides the subway.

BY JAMES WOOD

Fiction is at once real and imaginary. Not real at one moment and flickeringly illusory the next, like the fading pulse of a dying man, but both at once, as if a ghost had a pulse. Fiction is one giant pseudo-statement, a fact-checker's nightmare. Like one of our own lies, it can be completely "wrong" about the world and yet completely revelatory—completely "right"—about the psychology of the person issuing the error. Thus, one of fiction's most natural areas of inquiry, from Cervantes to Murakami, concerns states of confusion, error, or madness, in which a character's crazy fictions become intertwined with the novel's calmer fictions, and the reader's purchase on the reliable world becomes intermittently tenuous. Think of Kafka's story "The Judgment," which opens with a young man writing a letter to his old friend, who has gone to live in St. Petersburg, only to end a few pages later by putting in doubt whether such a friend exists at all.



The novelist John Wray compellingly evokes a damaged mind.

RACHEL DOMM

In standard third-person narration, a tiny slippage often suffices to alert us to a character's fiction-making. For instance, if I were describing the New York subway, in the third person, from the point of view of a sixteen-year-old boy, and I wrote, "The doors closed after ten seconds and the station fell away," I might or might not be exact about how long the train doors stay open (let slip the fact-checkers of war!), but the pseudo-statement would be unexceptionable. If, however, I wrote, "The doors closed after exactly ten seconds and the station fell resignedly away," the two adverbs might stiffen the reader's posture. Who is this boy, for whom exactitude is so manically important, yet who also sees the world so lyrically? And if I wrote, "The train fit into the tunnel perfectly," or "He decided to get out at Columbus Circle. To his surprise it happened very simply," the reader would sense a world of mental difficulty, in which trains may not always fit properly into tunnels and a teen-age boy may not always negotiate the exiting of a train. When the same boy overhears a man and a woman speaking, and, noticing that the woman waits for the man to finish before she speaks, senses that "their voices never touched," we might feel privy to a world of extraordinary sensory irritability, as if the pea were always poking through the piled mattresses, however many there were. Sentences like these, almost imperceptible deviations from shared reality, prepare us for much larger and more obvious swerves, such as "Most things that happened didn't bother him at all, but others got inside of him and stuck: nothing to do then but cough them up," and "When he thought of it now his tongue stuck to his mouth and he felt so much love that he had to spit part of it out." And:

> The train pulled into the next station and the car began to fill with halfdead people. That's the tiredness, thought Lowboy. They want to curl up on the ground and go to sleep. He yawned at them as they came in, showing them his teeth, and some of them yawned back.

These are all lines from John Wray's third novel, "Lowboy" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $25), an account of one climactic day in the life of Will Heller, known as Lowboy, a sixteen-year-old paranoid schizophrenic, who has gone off his medication, eluded the staff at the clinic that was looking after him, and is riding the subway trains, convinced that the "world's going to die in ten hours." Lowboy's chiliasm is obscurely meshed with fears of global warming. He wants to stop what he calls "the temperature games," and thinks he may be able to cool the world down by cooling down his and other bodies. He leaves a letter in code for his mother, whom he calls Violet. Decoded by the police, it runs, in part, "I WANT TO OPEN LIKE A FLOWER VIOLET. LIKE A FLOWER DOES IN POETRY. I THINK THAT MIGHT HELP AS THE WORLD IS INSIDE OF ME AND THAT WILL/MIGHT HELP TO COOL THE WORLD. POSSIBLY. BODIES WILL HAVE TO GET COLD NOW VIOLET." Neither Will's mother nor Detective Ali Lateef, both of whom are trying to track him down, has much of an idea what this might involve, but Lateef fears violence, since Will was committed to the Bellavista Clinic, a year and a half ago, for pushing his girlfriend, Emily, off a subway platform.

Lowboy spends much of the day, and thus much of the novel, underground. He briefly befriends a troubled meless woman, who goes by the name of Heather Dakota Covington, and who memorably tells him, at one point, "It's easy for me to put food in my mouth. I have no need of the clergy.... The clergy runs the kitchens. They make the food and give you it for nothing. Then they teach the parents how to fuck the children." He steals a man's briefcase, and the money inside it. He surfaces in order to visit Emily's school, where he finds her during lunch break. (She had survived the earlier subway incident.) Near the school, Lowboy and Emily are spotted by Violet Heller and Detective Lateef, but they run away. They hang out for a while in the Village, and then hit the subway again—the C train, the F, the No. 6.

But John Wray is less interested in Lowboy's picaresque circuits than in his mental circuits, whose damaged condition is brilliantly, compassionately evoked in the novel. In "aboveground" chapters that alternate with Lowboy's adventures, Violet Heller discusses her son's sad story with Detective Lateef—his first episode, at the age of twelve, for instance, when she found him outside, face down in the grass. Turning him over, she saw that his eyes were open but "unconvincing somehow, like the eyes of an expensive doll. . . . I knew right away that he was sick." Later that night, she was awakened by fiercely loud music from the stereo. Will was rolling around on the floor while the music blared, and singing, in a monotone, "Kill me." Great tact is required to pull off this kind of thing in fiction, since hallucination can be as boring as someone recounting a very long dream at breakfast, or it can slide too easily, like any horror story, into a bloody and relentless vitality. Wray is never boring, largely because he has an uncanny talent for ventriloquism, and he seems to know, with unerring authority, how to select and make eloquent the details of Lowboy's illness. He uses a variety of literary techniques. There are Violet's anecdotes, which are like pages from a case history. She tells Lateef about a time when her son was going to stay with his grandfather Richard. She recalls asking Will if he'll be all right with Richard. The boy replies that he is going to pretend to be a cat. "A few months later, the next time I saw Richard, he told me Will had kept it up for three whole weeks." The novel also reproduces a fabulously sad five-page letter, a stream of sick consciousness, sent by Will to his mother from the Bellavista Clinic:

> *I was sitting in the Smoking Room reading the Wall Street Journal when I saw the Schoolmaster aka Dr Fleisig sliding sideways down the hall. Fleisig is a friendly Mediterranean man he looks a little bit like Jacques Cousteau. But this time I jumped up & dropped my cigarette & ran to the door. Because I knew by then it wasn't exactly Fleisig. He was changing his haircut every 6 or 7 steps & playing temperature games inside his body. & at night he used my hands and mouth to eat with.*

This letter's final paragraph begins with a plaintive boast: "I'm writing to inform you that I remember who you are & not to worry."

And there is Lowboy himself, now loosed from Dr. Fleisig and the tyranny of the clinic, med-free, sure that time is slipping away, and giddily, fearfully, on the run from his mother and the detective. Lowboy's mind tumbles, and Wray's third-person narration often jitters into phantasmagoric first-person monologue in an effort to keep up. Lowboy tells Emily about his time at the clinic:

> I tried drawing pictures of you when they let me have a pencil but by then I had forgotten how you looked. Don't laugh Emily. Reading was a problem the meds made it hard and also certain words were not as they appeared. Light for example was Girl and Kick was House but Kick was also Bed. . . . I told time from the ice on the East River. I wrote you a letter when they let me have paper. . . . But they told me you'd already moved away. Also they told me you were thirty-eight years old.

What is impressive about the book is its control, and its humane comprehension of radical otherness. In this regard, it ideally justifies itself, as one always hopes novels will. You can imagine replying to someone who was curious about what it's like to be schizophrenic, "Well, start with John Wray's novel." Lowboy may often be lost to himself, but he is not lost to us. Wray knows how to induce and then manage a kind of epistemological schizophrenia in the reader, whereby we can inhabit Lowboy's groundless visions and still glimpse the ground they negate. There is a brilliant scene, like something out of Pinter, in which Lowboy is at a bakery in the Village, buying cupcakes. Emily waits for him outside. He is at the counter, and all is going reasonably well. But then his attention is caught by the bag: "The girl slipped the cupcakes into the bag with inexplicable delicacy and care. As though they were hazardous objects." What is she doing with the bag? he asks aloud. "What's she putting inside it?" he asks again. Your five cupcakes, a clerk says. Lowboy can hear a ticking sound. "Put the bag down," he orders suddenly. "Step away. . . . Put that fucking bag down. Take out the machinery." Not surprisingly, he is ejected from the shop. In his view, though, he is in control:

> He saw the shop as Emily was seeing it: the pastels, the clustered heads, the jars arrayed in cold bilateral symmetry. The order of the world is not my order. He left the bag where it was and retreated. He moved surefootedly and smoothly, letting himself be sucked backward, the last five minutes playing in reverse. Eyes on the floor like a minesweeper. Ears alive to the tiniest tick. Passing out through the door he felt a dryness, a sterility, a high desert wind. The pavement coated with dust as in the last scene of a Western.

He is, he imagines, an avenging angel. Yet when Emily asks him if anything went wrong he replies only, "Sold out." This is funny, but painful, too: we have witnessed a solitary confinement of the mind, in which a teen-ager has struggled, first of all, to convert a paranoid disorder into a heroic mental movie, and then has found that, outside his brain, where the civilians of sanity live, he can communicate nothing of his experience.

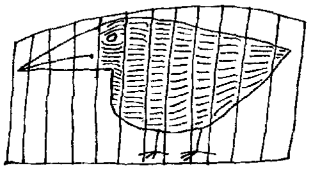
"Lowboy" comes with the now obligatory acknowledgments page—the literary equivalent of those old rock albums that used to thank "Terry, for all the Carlsbergs"—in which the author mentions helpful books like "Crazy All the Time," by Frederick L. Covan, M.D., and "Surviving Schizophrenia," by E. Fuller Torrey, M.D. These courtesies, while admirable in their way, stint the quality of autonomous fictional translation that Wray must have performed on his sources. His book has majestically subdued them to his art. Yet those sources also unhelpfully remind one of the novel's weakness, which is precisely that it is about "a paranoid schizophrenic," explicitly flagged as such by the publisher, rather than about someone who is losing his mind, as, say, Knut Hamsun's "Hunger" and Thomas Bernhard's "Concrete" are about people losing their minds. Books like Hamsun's and Bernhard's exult in the unreadable, the indecipherable. "Lowboy" is exceptionally tender and acute, but it is at times in danger of falling into the legible stability of case history, in which the reader might check off recognizable symptoms, usefully assisted by the subject's mother, who is on hand to provide the necessary background information, and validated by the acknowledged medical sources. John Wray is a daring young writer, highly praised for his last two novels (both historical, and both unlike each other), and yet his third novel is, for all its boldness, also a bit conventional. An early review quoted on the book's cover likens it to Dostoyevsky, but "Lowboy" lacks the bountiful *inefficiency* of "Crime and Punishment" or "The Devils." The book is less bold, less playfully demanding, than Rivka Galchen's recent novel, "Atmospheric Disturbances," which explores a similar mental deviancy from what Galchen wickedly calls "a consensus view of reality."

Instead, "Lowboy" performs a strange two-step: whenever Will is at the center of the novel, the narration vigorously stretches itself; but the alternate chapters, in which Violet and Lateef give chase, squeeze the book back into conventionality. These scenes are elegantly done, and are often moving, but they seem, by comparison with Will's experimental story, unchallengingly realist. They secure the novel, giving it the familiar form of the police procedural. Detective Lateef's "anger and reticence," we are told, make him "a man of solitary pleasures," with a penchant for old 78 records and single-malt Scotch. Well, of course, like every other fictional detective. And, just as any episode of "Law & Order" professionally hoards its narrative secret, surrendering it, as a dog might a stick, only at the very last minute, so "Lowboy" also withholds a crucial secret about Violet Heller—a secret that, once revealed near the end of the book, necessarily augments the atmosphere of medical case history. This explains why the same review that likens "Lowboy" to Dostoyevsky also applauds its "thriller-like pace," the way "the suspense is expertly maintained." A weaker novelist might well need this traditional truss; the talented John Wray surely doesn't. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

The American 1930s, *by Peter Conn (Cambridge; $29.99).* In this literary history, Conn offers a corrective to the assumption that the Depression decade was dominated culturally by leftist aesthetics and politics. Organized as a series of case studies, the book reveals fascinating vicissitudes of art and history. In a section on frontier fiction, a genre with a long lineage, Conn notes that it developed "edges" in the thirties, its self-reliant heroes newly resonant with a nation of "diminished" men. Though the thirties' best-sellers reflected "the racism that continued to deform" society ("Gone with the Wind" appeared in 1936), it was also the decade when "the pseudo-scientific bases on which racism was grounded were decisively confounded," as students of Franz Boas, including Zora Neale Hurston and Ruth Benedict, rose to prominence. Taken together, the studies powerfully demonstrate that, despite the strain of the Depression, the United States in the thirties was "a place of enormous ideological and imaginative complexity."

China Underground, *by Zachary Mexico (Soft Skull; $16.95).* Through encounters with sundry artists, musicians, students, bar owners, gangsters, prostitutes, and slackers, Mexico assembles a compelling portrait of China's contemporary youth culture and the limits of Communist control. The book's subjects include a twenty-seven-year-old self-taught disaster photographer from the coal country in Shenyang; a twenty-nine-year-old mobster in Qingdao; a twenty-two-year-old Hendrixian Uighur guitar player making a splash in Shanghai; a Beijing university student who wishes that the system encouraged less rote memorization and more original thought; and an investigative journalist who no longer publishes himself, instead leading Western reporters to controversial stories. Mexico, a musician and poet who was a student in Beijing and subsequently managed a night club, has assumed a pseudonym to avoid trouble with the Chinese authorities. While occasionally anxious about his youth and his lack of credentials, he is a good listener and knows how to tell a provocative and illuminating story.



American Rust, *by Philipp Meyer (Spiegel & Grau; $24.95).* Set in a moribund Pennsylvania steel town, this bleak but skillful début novel is both affecting and timely. Isaac English was a child of promise whose dreams of a bright future beyond his troubled environs were thwarted early on by economic circumstance. His mother dead, his father disabled, a college education no more than a fantasy, he resolves to flee town but is implicated in a violent act that abruptly changes the lives of everyone around him. Meyer occasionally stumbles, especially when he is dealing with the realities of criminal law, but his rigorously sculpted psychologies and assured sense of place are compelling.

Ghosts, *by César Aira, translated from the Spanish by Chris Andrews (New Directions; $12.95).* Aira's novella takes place in Buenos Aires on New Year's Eve, inside a half-finished luxury-apartment complex. As the night watchman and his family, who occupy a makeshift dwelling on the roof, prepare for the evening's festivities, a congregation of male ghosts flits about the building, sunning themselves in a "mood of summery exhibitionism." Aira alternates between banal details of the family's everyday existence and intellectual flights of fancy that include such diverse subjects as the social structure of Pygmy communities and Aborigine myth. As night falls, the watchman's ineffectual, fiercely imaginative teen-age stepdaughter is drawn into a deadly pact with the ghosts as a way to escape an unnamed "specific torment." Aira conjures a languorous, surreal atmosphere of baking heat and quietly menacing shadows that puts one in mind of a painting by de Chirico.

MUSICAL EVENTS

UNLIKELY STORIES

"Il Trovatore" and "La Sonnambula," at the Met.

BY ALEX ROSS

In the past several weeks, the Metropolitan Opera has unveiled new productions of Verdi's "Il Trovatore" and Bellini's "La Sonnambula." The two works have little in common, except that their plots don't make a whole lot of sense. In "Il Trovatore," a Spanish Gypsy seeks to avenge her mother's death at the hands of a count by throwing the count's infant son, Manrico, into the fire, but, in her excitement, she grabs the wrong baby and incinerates her own son instead. Actually, that all happens long before the curtain rises; the opera ends with the count's other son ordering Manrico's execution without knowing of the family connection. In "La Sonnambula," a soon-to-be-wed Swiss woman is afflicted with somnambulism and winds up in the bed of a stranger, causing her fiancé to lose confidence in her. When she sleepwalks again, this time onto a window ledge, all are assured of her innocence.

Sondra Radvanovsky with Marcelo Álvarez in "Trovatore."

RUTH GWILY

Such unlikely goings on invite mockery. "Trovatore" inspired two famous parodies: Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Pirates of Penzance" and the Marx Brothers' "A Night at the Opera." Then again most entertainment, serious or otherwise, appears rather silly when you view it from afar. Nothing in these operas is any more implausible than the events of the average Shakespeare play, or, for that matter, of the average action movie. The difference is that the conventions of the latter are widely accepted these days, so that if, say, Matt Damon rides a unicycle the wrong way down the Autobahn and kills a squad of Uzbek thugs with a package of Twizzlers the audience cheers rather than guffaws. The wilder things get, the better. Opera is no different. Verdi didn't seize on the lurid matter of "Trovatore" because he found it believable; rather, he relished the extremity of the situation, which forced his characters to react in extreme ways. The sonic violence of operatic singing becomes, under the circumstances, more plausible.

Yet contemporary opera directors often view the over-the-top aesthetic of mainstream opera as an embarrassment to be finessed. Either the story must be radically altered or the audience must be made aware that the story is not to be taken seriously. The result has been an epidemic of productions that reject the essential nature of the art form. Perhaps prospective directors should be given a brief questionnaire:

1. Do you like opera?
2. Do you like *this* opera?

If the answer to either of these questions is no, it might be wise to give the Rolodex another flick of the wrist. This is not to say that every production must slavishly follow the stage directions; but an interpretation should begin with respect rather than contempt.

Mary Zimmerman, the Chicago-based theatre director, had little contact with opera until she presented an overstudied "Lucia di Lammermoor" at the Met last season. Zimmerman's idea for "La Sonnambula" is that an opera company is rehearsing a conventional production of Bellini's work, replete with kitschy Swiss costumes; the lead soprano and tenor are as much in love as their characters, Amina and Elvino. The conceit works reasonably well at first, with choice depictions of backstage shenanigans (the diva chattering on her cell phone, the stage manager glowering over her clipboard). But Zimmerman failed to supply the ingenious scene-by-scene twists needed to keep such a scenario afloat. When the chorus members discover Amina asleep in the rehearsal studio, it makes no sense that they'd question her morals. And those hectic opening scenes undercut one of this opera's glories—the languid, trancelike aura of the early arias and duets. Bellini, a master of suspended time, liked nothing better than to spin out an endless vocal line over murmuring strings. "La Sonnambula" suited him precisely because it provided a minimum of incident. A sympathetic director would have relished rather than resisted that inherent trait.

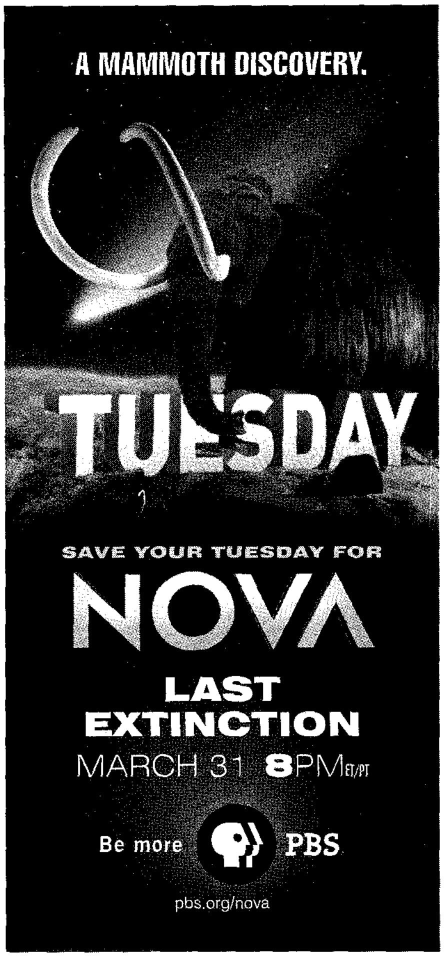
Natalie Dessay, a soprano with vital stage presence and comic flair, did what she could to inject warmth into Zimmerman's arch scenario. High notes no longer come quite as easily to her as they did when she first invaded the Met stage, singing the Fiakermilli in "Arabella," in 1994, but she hit them all the same. The cavatinas, those oases of slow melody, were glowingly sung and beautifully detailed; she may be ready for a shift into less stratospheric repertory. Singing opposite her was Juan Diego Flórez, who, as he has in every recent appearance at the Met, triggered stormy ovations with effortless vocal acrobatics and just-so phrasing. He, too, might benefit from a modest change of course: he tends to deploy the same array of vocal colors on each outing and seems always to be playing the same character. Evelino Pidò failed to assist either singer with his conducting, which was as half-baked as the direction.

"Il Trovatore" fared better. The production, by the tastefully flamboyant Scottish director David McVicar, marks a welcome change from a string of recent Met stagings that seemed disengaged from their subjects, too cool for school. McVicar, re-creating a production that he first presented at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, trusted in the raw power of Verdi's tale. The action has been moved from the fifteenth century to the early nineteenth, the time of Goya; the sets, by Charles Edwards, handsomely mimic Goya's dirty skies and grimy interiors. An adroit use of the rotating stage allows for swift changes of scene. It's a production with an earthy, lusty vibe. McVicar is a natural for the Met.

Few operas are as difficult to cast as "Trovatore," which, as Caruso joked, requires nothing more than the four greatest singers in the world. The Met's quartet in this run may not have quite answered that call, but the job got done. Sondra Radvanovsky sang the role of Leonora, the unlucky woman caught between the two warring brothers. She brought to bear a rich-hued, lightly tremulous soprano, reminiscent of Old World voices of yore. The high notes didn't always fall squarely on pitch, but they sailed through the house, and, more important, they were integrated into a strongly flowing musical line. She sounded weaker in the lower register, where some of Leonora's most wrenching music lies. "Tacea la notte placida," the nocturnally yearning first aria, flickered out rather than smoldered in the bottom range. Yet, in all, Radvanovsky had more oomph than the last few singers the Met has fielded in this part.

Dolora Zajick has owned the role of the Gypsy Azucena at the Met for almost two decades. On opening night, she let out a couple of distressing sounds in the upper register, but when I came back, later in the run, she was as commanding as in earlier years. Dmitri Hvorostovsky, as the count, delivered his principal aria, "Il balen," with matchless lyric poise, although he struggled to project the character's vengeful side. Marcelo Álvarez, the Manrico, was a zesty substitute for the true Verdi tenor we're all still waiting for. Gianandrea Noseda, the conductor, imposed intricate tempo changes that caused trouble on the first night but made for an exceptionally lively interpretation at the subsequent show.

On March 15th, Radvanovsky, Hvorostovsky, Dessay, and Flórez returned to the stage for the Met's hundred-and-twenty-fifth-anniversary gala, joining two dozen other stars for a four-hour tour of the company's past glories. Productions from the early years, replete with giant spears and fluttering white doves, were entertainingly evoked; lavish re-creations of vintage costumes, designed by Catherine Zuber, showed that latter-day theatrical values aren't always an advance on the supposed clichés of the past. The evening began with a tribute to the Met's inaugural 1883 production, of Gounod's "Faust," and John Relyea's Mephistophelean getup, with sporty feathered cap, put to shame the weird rubber suit that René Pape had to wear in the same opera a couple of seasons back. Renée Fleming took possession of a gown resembling one that Maria Jeritza wore in 1921 and sang a deeply lovely Marietta's Lied, from "Die Tote Stadt." There were various highs and lows, but the evening belonged to Plácido Domingo, who, at sixty-eight, sings with only slightly reduced power and undiminished passion. In the final scene of "Otello," Domingo accomplished the ultimate trick of making the theatrical apparatus around him melt away, summoning an imaginary world with the shuddering beauty of his voice. ♦



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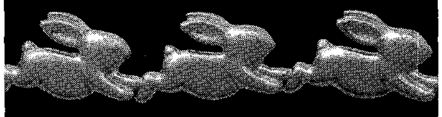
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THE SKY LINE

ALL HE SURVEYED

How Palladian was Palladio?

BY PAUL GOLDBERGER

It is probably fair to say that Andrea Palladio, who died in 1580, is the patron saint of every McMansion that has ever cluttered the American landscape, because it was he who brought architectural aspiration to the houses of the moderately wealthy. Before Palladio, serious architecture was for churches, public buildings, and the palaces of the richest nobles. Palladio studied the architecture of ancient Rome, codified its elements in a famous treatise, and started putting porticoes and pediments and domes on the houses of the landed gentry, conferring on them a feeling of classical pedigree.

Palladio was the most influential architect in Western history. Our idea of grandeur comes predominantly from him. Without Palladio, who was Thomas Jefferson's favorite architect, Monticello would not have looked the way it did; nor, for that matter, would Scarlett O'Hara's Tara. If modern developers have used his treatise "The Four Books of Architecture" as a mere catalogue of columns and cupolas for the upwardly mobile, Palladio isn't to blame. His book shows that making good new buildings is a matter not of just copying old ones but of learning their lessons. Still, the man who wrote that "often the architect has to follow the wishes of those who are spending rather than what one really ought to do" clearly had a certain sympathy for architects who have to accommodate the questionable tastes of rich clients. He knew that you had to earn a living.

Palladio was born in 1508, and his five-hundredth birthday is currently being marked, belatedly but enthusiastically, with an elaborate exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, in London. Most architecture exhibitions are frustratingly vicarious: they try to make us feel as if we were in actual buildings, with films and computer simulations, but they can't. This exhibition, to its credit, doesn't try to substitute for a direct experience—although, as it happens, the Royal Academy is in Burlington House, a key building in the spread of the Palladian style in the eighteenth century. There are no photographs other than some small ones attached to the labels, like footnotes, and although there are a few beautiful large wooden models of Palladio's buildings, the bulk of the exhibition is made up of drawings, plans, paintings, letters, ledgers, and other artifacts; the idea isn't to hit you with special effects but to present materials that tell the story of Palladio's buildings.

Many of these materials date back to the sixteenth century, and one thing that becomes evident as you look at them is that making buildings in Palladio's time was as politically and financially challenging as it is now. Many of Palladio's drawings show versions of buildings different from what was built, sometimes because the client insisted on changing things, and sometimes because the architect kept revising the design, trying scheme after scheme until he was satisfied. Perfection came slowly, with all kinds of false starts. A lot of the documents displayed relate to money—a consideration never far from the minds of architects and patrons. A logbook kept by Girolamo Chiericati, who commissioned one of Palladio's greatest houses, records every expense, beginning with the outlay, on November 15, 1550, of seven troni for the notebook itself. Palladio got four gold scudi for preparation of plans for the house, and ten gold scudi for spending two years supervising construction. Chiericati also gave him a load of pears.

Palladio was born in Padua and grew up in Vicenza. He was trained as a stonemason, but his potential must have been clear, because he had a knack for finding mentors. Under the sponsorship of Giangiorgio Trissino, a Vicenzan nobleman and intellectual, he went to Rome in his early thirties. There he explored ruins, sketched, and started thinking about how to make something new from the ancient buildings he saw. Some years later, Trissino helped get Palladio his first job, reconstructing Vicenza's old assembly and market hall into a grand public building, called the Basilica. Palladio wrapped the old buildings in a new façade, a two-story loggia of open arches, with Tuscan columns on the first floor and Ionic on the second—a simple gesture that raises an ordinary building to monumental grandeur. Palladio had a gift for composition, for combining solids and voids, curves and straight lines, depth and flatness, in nearly perfect equilibrium, and he was among the first to think of classicism as a vocabulary that could transform mundane structures into something special.

After this important commission, local nobles lined up to have him design their country villas and city palazzi. The most famous of these is the Villa Almerico-Capra, also known as the Villa Rotonda, a miracle of symmetry and proportion with a large central dome and identical porticoes on all four sides. But, for all its beauty, the Villa Rotonda has a rigid order that is atypical of Palladio's lively inventiveness. Taken as a whole, the villas he built around Vicenza are more severe, unconventional, and risky than the Palladian label leads you to expect. The façade of the Villa Foscari has a grand Ionic portico, with a classical pediment tucked above it like a huge dormer; in the back, Palladio placed an arched window so high that it pushed through into a pediment. At the Villa Emo, the portico is pushed right up against the façade, and the open space behind it is carved out of the mass of the house. And the Villa Poiana has a semicircular arch over the door, with five round windows arrayed around it, like huge polka dots. There's no precise model for any of this in the ancient buildings Palladio studied, but Palladio was a modern architect, not a copyist. It was the new ideas that mattered.

The documentary record that Palladio left behind tells us only so much about his personality, but his ambition is not in doubt: he essentially invented the modern architectural career.

Palladio's Villa Rotonda. At one time, a visit to the Palladian villas was considered an essential part of an architectural education.

ERIK-JAN OUWERKERK/HOLLANDSE HOOGTE/REDUX

The "Four Books," which Palladio published in 1570, when he was in his sixties, is not just a book of rules and standards but also the first architectural monograph. Palladio included a portfolio of his own work, which disseminated his ideas and made his buildings more famous than anyone else's. "Only as a result of the book did the very idea of an architectural opus take shape," the architectural historian Kurt Forster said at a conference on Palladio at Yale this year. "Were one to ask how an architect can extend the shelf life of his work, it is to Palladio that one must turn."

Palladio's writings gave his architecture mythic status, and made his villas, and the churches he later designed in Venice, into places of pilgrimage. Jefferson tried unsuccessfully to get to Italy to see them; Goethe came away from the Villa Rotonda, in 1786, saying that the architect was a truly great man. At one time, a visit to the Palladian villas was considered an essential part of an architectural education, as important a stop on the grand tour as the Gothic cathedrals. Palladio was the first architect whose reputation preceded his buildings. People arrived in Vicenza expecting to be awed, the way they do now when they go to see the work of Frank Gehry in Bilbao, or of Rem Koolhaas in Beijing.

Yet the tradition of reverence that has sprung up around Palladio's work is in danger of obscuring its humbler but more interesting features. Since many villas were not only aristocratic retreats but also working farms, he made specific recommendations about where to place granaries, haylofts, quarters for animals, and wine cellars, prescribing that they be connected to the villa by covered arcades so that the owner could keep the agricultural functions at a distance but still inspect them without going outdoors. Palladio wrote that his porticoes were there at least as much to keep the owner dry as he went in and out as they were to add majesty to the façade. In the "Four Books" he tries to distill prescriptions from a lifetime's accumulation of know-how. He recommends building country houses near rivers, but not standing waters, "because they generate very bad air, which we can easily avoid, if we build in elevated and cheerful places . . . where the inhabitants are healthy and cheerful, and preserve a good color, and are unmolested by gnats and other small animals."

It's odd to think of history's most famous architect being as obsessed with animal smells as he was with scale and proportion. But not being afraid of the ordinary side of his job was a key component of Palladio's genius. To him, architecture existed to solve problems, and he seems to have given equal weight to elevating the image of his clients, making their lives function more smoothly, and creating beautiful objects for the world. Figuring out where to put the farm animals and shaping designs of transcendent beauty were all in a day's work. ♦

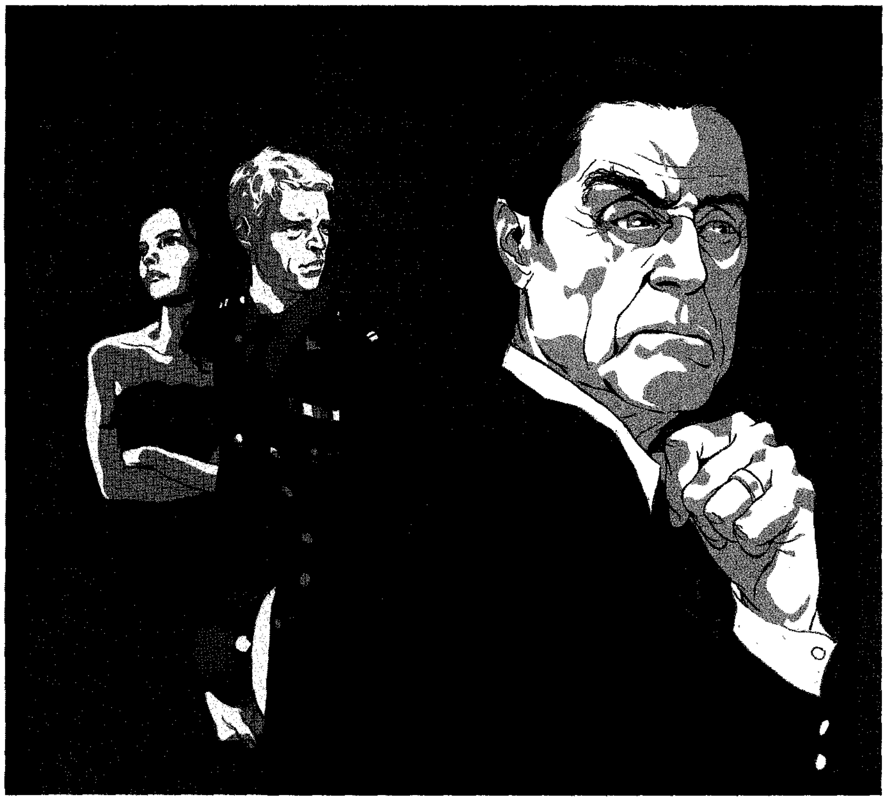
ON TELEVISION

LION KING

Ian McShane rules on NBC.

BY NANCY FRANKLIN

"Kings," a new NBC drama, inspired by the Biblical story of King David and set in what seems to be the near future, is about new beginnings, or, looked at another way, about the continuity of history, but there is an end-of-days feel to it in at least one sense: "new NBC drama" is a phrase that will become largely a thing of the past this fall, when Jay Leno takes over the network's 10 P.M. time slot, Monday through Friday. Another new NBC drama, "Southland," a police show set in Los Angeles, begins on April 9th, but it, too, has the Ghost of NBC Past's fingers on it. It will succeed "ER" (and comes from the production team of John Wells, "ER" 's creator), which ends on April 2nd, after fifteen seasons—fifteen seasons of drama you could count on being there same night, same time, every fall, every year, with each season but one lasting a now almost unthinkable twenty-two episodes or more. Not that it isn't time for "ER" to go; it's just that its departure reminds one of the ongoing unravelling of the old system, though those reminders, as the series winds down, have been interrupted briefly and sweetly by the pleasure of seeing cameos by the show's early stars. Admit it: you really, really liked seeing Julianna Margulies and George Clooney share the screen again, as they did two weeks ago, and finding out that their characters, Nurse Carol Hathaway and Dr. Doug Ross, were still together after all these years.



Allison Miller, Chris Egan, and Ian McShane in "Kings."

TOMER HANUKA

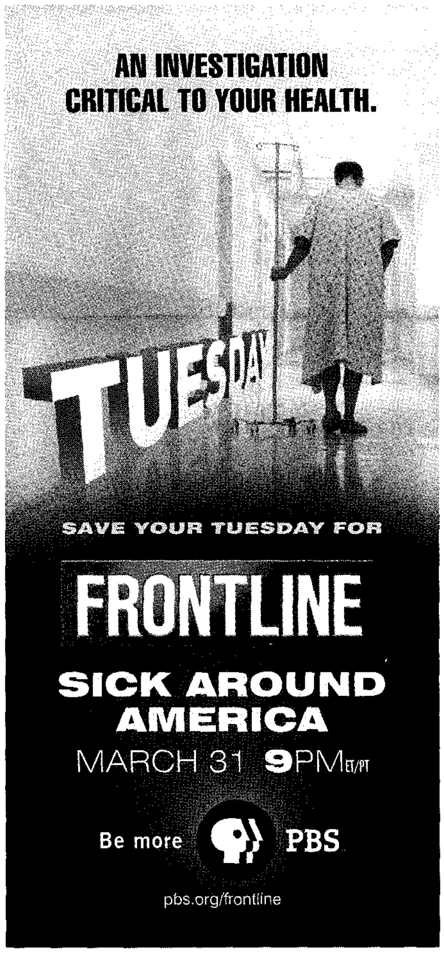
"Kings" airs on Sundays, which seems appropriate, given the show's origins in old-time religion—not to mention the fact that Sunday nights still ring with the echoes of a magnificent performance by the star of "Kings," Ian McShane, in the HBO series "Deadwood," cancelled, too soon, two and a half years ago. Now, as then, he plays a vigorous, brutal, sympathetic, ragingly leonine, charismatic character; in the NBC show he is King Silas, the leader of the newly unified kingdom of Gilboa, whose capital, Shiloh, is being inaugurated as the series starts. At the beginning of the first episode, we alternate between scenes at an idyllic farm, where a family is watching Silas's speech on television, and scenes at the capital, as Silas walks through the palace and out onto a balcony overlooking a vast crowd. (Think Obama's Inauguration.) The size of Silas's ego matches the size of the moment, and he speaks in a booming voice of the work that went into transforming "the ruins that would become Shiloh." What was there before was "nothing—ashes, an empty shell of a city bombed ten times over by three armies." He tells of an epiphany that changed his life, the sign from God that told him he was meant to bring long-warring factions to peace: butterflies appeared and danced in the air above him, and then came to light on his head in the form of a crown. Meanwhile, back on the farm, David Shepherd (Chris Egan), a golden youth nearing manhood, whose father died in the war for unification, has had his eyes opened as well; the King's religious conscience, Reverend Samuels (Eamonn Walker), had car trouble on his way to the ceremony in Shiloh and alighted, so to speak, at the farm. David, a mechanic, fixed the problem easily. Then Reverend Samuels, as a courtesy, wiped a smudge from David's forehead. The gesture clearly meant something, and David knows it; the look in his eyes tells us that he's been touched by destiny. We skip ahead two years, and David is a soldier in the desert, fighting Gilboa's enemy, Gath. This is where that destiny takes shape; disobeying orders, he crosses enemy lines to free two Gilboan hostages and, against all odds, succeeds, by taking out a menacing tank that has the word "Goliath" painted across its front.

Obvious, yes, and deliberately so. The story's bone structure is always evident, but "Kings" manages not to seem patly transported into some random future, where burlap is now Kevlar and slingshots are laser sticks. It's imaginative, and its familiar outlines don't prevent it from being engrossing moment by moment. In fact, it's engrossing in a rather maddeningly clever way, in the sense that you can't tell exactly when the series is taking place. It could be ten years from now, it could be thirty years from now, or it could be that the world being depicted is an alternative version of the one we're in right now; it looks like it, give or take a few buildings and the place-names. Watching the show, you feel a tension as you try to decide whether it's holding a mirror up to the present or whether it's making an argument about where the world may soon be headed. We have already noticed, in the aerial establishing shots of Shiloh, that "Kings" is filmed in Manhattan, and that the city isn't just a film location. It's never stated, but it's clear that Shiloh *was* New York City, before it was destroyed to the point where even its name disappeared. There are inconsistencies that give you pause: the Time Warner Center is still standing—in fact, it's the home of the King's court—but the Empire State Building, I noticed with an actual start, is gone, as is the Chrysler Building. A tall building that resembles the planned Freedom Tower is (thanks to special effects) in midtown. The exterior of the palace is a well-known apartment building, the Apthorp, on the Upper West Side, a block from Zabar's and H & H Bagels. (We don't see those emporiums in the show, but I'm going to assume that they still exist in the world of "Kings"; otherwise, let me tell you, there is real cause for despair in the realm.)

David, after his triumph in the desert, becomes an instant folk hero, a status that he can't avoid, since one of the hostages he saved was Silas's son, Jack (Sebastian Stan), and, besides, a camera captured an iconic image of David standing in front of the Goliath tank. Silas instinctively knows that David is someone he must keep an eye on—this largehearted young man could be of use to him, or he could be a threat. Silas "rewards" him with a post in Shiloh as a military press liaison—the last thing that a true soldier would want. Sure enough, David chafes at how life in the big city just keeps rolling along: his former company is fighting just a few hours away and yet "it's as if nothing's happening except on TV."

"Kings" is about David's journey and his inevitable clashes with Silas, but there's also a fair amount of intrigue and family psychodrama all around them, which makes "Kings" almost as much fun as "Dynasty." Jack is gay, and bitter about David's golden-boy position in the court. (Little does he realize that his father has come close to having David killed.) In public, Silas's wife, Rose (Susanna Thompson, from "Once and Again"), is a non-threatening middle-aged helpmeet, the perfect accessory for a king; behind the scenes, she expertly pulls strings to keep her family in power and her husband and children in line. David early on is drawn to Silas's daughter, Michelle (Allison Miller), but her mother warns her not to get involved with him, which would be fine with some viewers, as Miller, who is in her early twenties, looks like a generically pretty high-school freshman and makes no impression in the show. Michelle also lobbies her father at court on health-care issues, and is equally uncredible as a policy wonk. Jack's part, and his ruined appearance—a pulpy mouth and a squinty-eyed look of calculation and overindulgence—are right out of "Gossip Girl"; in fact, Stan appeared on that show in its first season and just brought his Lothario act back last week. Then, there are a few issues going on in the country itself: an impending financial crisis, and a war. The plot is confusing when it comes to the war. For one thing, the show—at least as far as the first few episodes go—has made Shiloh real but not the rest of the kingdom. Apart from the farmhouse where David lived and the desert, we never have a sense of how big the kingdom is, what's at stake, and whether a battle with the enemy, Gath, over water rights is significant or not—whether it's the equivalent of Maine trying to steal New Hampshire's entire eighteen miles of coastline, or just two countries' egos clashing.

What makes "Kings" compelling is McShane's tremendous life force and confident storytelling by Michael Green, a former writer and producer of "Heroes," who created "Kings" and wrote six episodes, and Francis Lawrence, who directed four of them. The masterly camerawork pulled me along—there were great shots that reminded me of comic-book panels in the DC Comics I used to read (as it happens, Green co-wrote a movie version of "Green Lantern" that is coming out next year), where artists were able to depict points of view that cameras couldn't. Yet the cameras do it in "Kings"; in a good way, watching the show is like reading a comic book. ♦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THE CURRENT CINEMA

TRICKSTERS AND SAINTS

"Duplicity" and "Hunger."

BY DAVID DENBY

The man and woman meet at a sunshiny garden party at the American Embassy in Dubai. They are both tall, intelligent, equipped. Julia Roberts is Claire Stenwick, an operative for the C.I.A. She arrives in state: heels, a print dress, cleavage, her hair in a French twist. Clive Owen is Ray Koval, an MI6 agent. The dark stubble of Owen's earlier movies is gone; he wears a suit and tie. What follows is a very friendly duel. Ray comes on strong while pretending to be shocked that Claire thinks he's coming on at all. Attitude shades into irony, which then shades into mutual put-on; each is amused by the other's performance, and relishes the other's enjoyment of his own performance as well. They fall into a bantering rhythm so natural it's already an early stage of sex, an attraction sharpened by professional rivalry and instinctive one-upmanship. That night, Claire sleeps with Ray, drugs him, and steals some secret documents from his hotel room. Starting with the first scenes of "Duplicity," written and directed by Tony Gilroy, we know we're in fast company, and it's a great relief. High-style flirtation, once a glory of American comedy, has not, to put it calmly, been much in evidence in the Matthew McConaughey era.

Julia Roberts and Clive Owen as corporate spies in Tony Gilroy's "Duplicity."

OWEN SMITH

The movie jumps five years, from 2003 to 2008, and both Ray and Claire have left government service for careers in industrial espionage. They work for rival consumer-products giants: Claire for Burkett & Randle, which is lodged in a modernist slab on Park Avenue and led by the pompous, philosophizing megalomaniac Howard Tully (Tom Wilkinson), and Ray for Equikrom, stationed across the street and led by the smarmy, other-annihilating bastard Dick Garsik (Paul Giamatti). Actually, Claire and Ray both work for Equikrom: Claire has been planted in B. & R.'s counterintelligence operation as a mole, and Ray is "handling" her. If all this sounds vaguely like a John le Carré novel from thirty-five years ago, the resemblance is intentional. The sardonic joke animating "Duplicity" is that corporate espionage is now carried out with the same high-tech capabilities, the same complex scams, ploys, and thefts that rival intelligence services used at the height of the Cold War. Is this true? I don't really know, but the portrait of corporate deviousness certainly suits the mood of the moment. At stake in this new war is not the fate of nations but the fate of companies—especially a company's hot new lotion or cream that might allow it to dominate the market for years. Ray and Claire hope to steal the formula for one of these game-changers, sell it to some avid third party, and walk away rich. As was clear from Gilroy's wonderful "Michael Clayton," we live in a fallen world. On rare occasions, an emotion other than greed motivates someone, and the world changes a little. Dramatizing that margin of hope—a kind of mutation into decency—is what separates the mainly cynical Gilroy from the total cynics.

"Duplicity" is an enormously enjoyable hybrid, a romantic comedy set at the center of a caper movie. But the froth arrives with steel bubbles—the tone is amused and mordantly satirical. On the tarmac of a small airport, as elegant white corporate jets attend in the background, the two C.E.O.s, both beautifully dressed, clumsily flail at each other in super-slow motion. (We seem to be watching a winking homage to the violence in "The Wild Bunch.") Beneath the bespoke suit lies the animal. Except for this divertimento on the tarmac, the movie goes like a shot, with considerable suspense and many complex action sequences cut into one another by the brilliant film editor John Gilroy (the director's brother). Tony Gilroy likes to fool around. He teases the standard forms of plotting, expanding the cinema's capabilities as a time machine. Not only are the various spies and their masters conning one another; Gilroy is conning us, too, with a series of flashbacks to different places (including a beautiful stretch of Rome's old center), where Ray and Claire meet and deliver variations on the same conversation again and again. Just when we think we understand what they are up to, Gilroy jumps to the past and resets the game. The conversation we have just heard that took place in Cleveland three months ago—how does it feed into the present in New York? Are Ray and Claire working together or not? The movie seems to be reshuffling itself as it goes along. Eventually, the cards are dealt and turned face up.

One may wonder if the fancy plotting is necessary or if Gilroy is just testing the limits of a caper movie. The answer, I think, is the latter, and the narrative bamboozlements may leave some audiences in an irritated funk. My advice is to relax and not try to understand everything immediately; instead, enjoy the idea that Ray and Claire are turned on by their mutual distrust. In "Closer" (2004), an allegedly serious movie adapted from Patrick Marber's acrid play, Julia Roberts and Clive Owen tore into each other. This time, they are joshing: the characters lie, test, probe, reverse themselves, fall into bed and out of it. The debonair tone gives the movie a lift, since their alertness to each other's moods is often richly funny and sexy. Roberts usually takes the lead in trying out some scam, and Owen always catches up, though he can never quite get ahead of her. His voice rising in dismay, Owen has a talent, it turns out, not just for bitter tirades but for earnest puzzlement. These two glamorous people make a terrific team. It will be interesting to see whether the grownup audiences, normally slumbering in their caves until the fall awards season, will come out to watch the graceful leopards at play.

In "Hunger," the British video artist Steve McQueen has made an imposing feature-length movie that attempts to equal the discipline and fanaticism of his real-world subjects—Irish Republican fighters who, incarcerated in Maze prison, in Northern Ireland, went on a hunger strike in 1981, led by Bobby Sands (Michael Fassbender). Ten of the men, after prolonged self-deprivation, died terrible deaths. The stated purpose of the strike—to force the British government to treat the men not as criminals but as political prisoners, with certain rights—was of less importance than the real purpose, which was to reignite the I.R.A. cause in Northern Ireland. Yet the movie's preoccupations are as much religious, even sacerdotal, as political. McQueen and his collaborator, the playwright Enda Walsh, never tell us what the twenty-seven-year-old Sands actually did as an I.R.A. warrior. Sands's role in "Hunger" is to be a tormented prisoner in extremis, his pale body a landscape upon which the most awful punishment and self-punishment is enacted.

"Hunger" begins with the daily routine of a Maze guard, who warily leaves home after soaking his knuckles in water (he will use those knuckles later to bash prisoners in the face), and then shifts to the grim entry into Maze of a new prisoner, Davey Gillen (Brian Milligan), who refuses his uniform, is handed a blanket to cover his nakedness, and is then initiated into the rituals of protest by his cellmate on the corridor of Maze where the most rebellious prisoners are kept. The men smear the walls with excrement and spill the chamber pots under the door, fouling the hallway with piss. Bobby Sands lives a few cells down from Gillen. He passes his orders on tiny, balled-up pieces of paper that the prisoners exchange from mouth to mouth when they mill together at Sunday Mass. For much of the movie, an intense silence reigns, interrupted by outbursts of furious brutality against the naked prisoners, who are smashed against walls or flogged with truncheons as they're dragged between rows of uniformed thugs. In all, Steve McQueen is a master of fascination rather than of drama—he creates stunning shots rather than an intricate story. He's not, for instance, much interested in the relations among the men; he fixes on such things as a fly crawling across a prisoner's hand or the slow disintegration of a starving man's body. The style is one of austere sensationalism.

To his credit, McQueen makes it clear that life is hell for some of the guards, too, and also for the prison personnel who have to clean up the corridor. But "Hunger" moves inexorably to the last stage of this Passion play: Sands, starving himself for sixty-six days and slowly dying as he lies spread out naked on a bed. Earlier, in a powerfully written conversation, Father Dominic Moran (Liam Cunningham), a tough Catholic priest, accuses Sands of not loving life, of having lost touch with the world or any rational political purpose. Father Moran is exactly right, but the movie takes the opposite view—that the men are sacred in their anguish. In the end, even though I recognized the need to be reminded of Guantánamo and of crimes carried out there, I was awed but not moved by "Hunger." Sands is a violent man who dies in the service of a dubious cause and on a cross of his own choosing. He's a Christ without humanity, and McQueen's aestheticization of his suffering and death becomes borderline creepy. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

The Front Row, a blog about movies.

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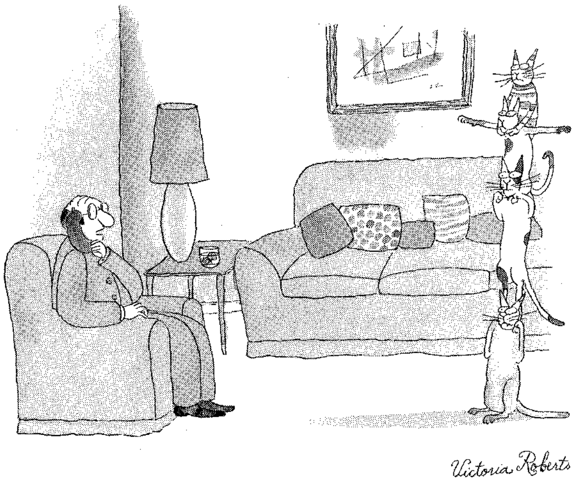
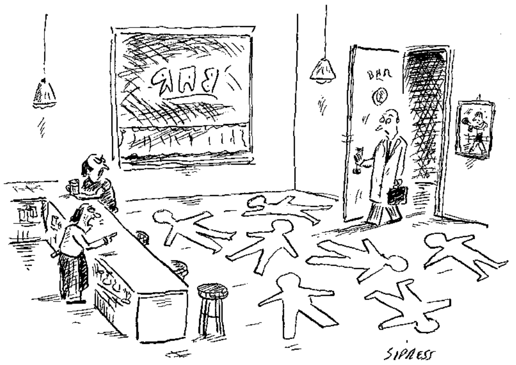
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Danny Shanahan, must be received by Sunday, March 29th. Finalists in the March 16th contest appear below; go online to vote. We will announce the winner, along with the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 13th issue. The winner will be given a signed print of the cartoon. Any U.S. resident age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"Yes, Officer, they say he was about six feet four, with pointy ears and abnormally short arms."
Alexia Kauffman, Arlington, Va.



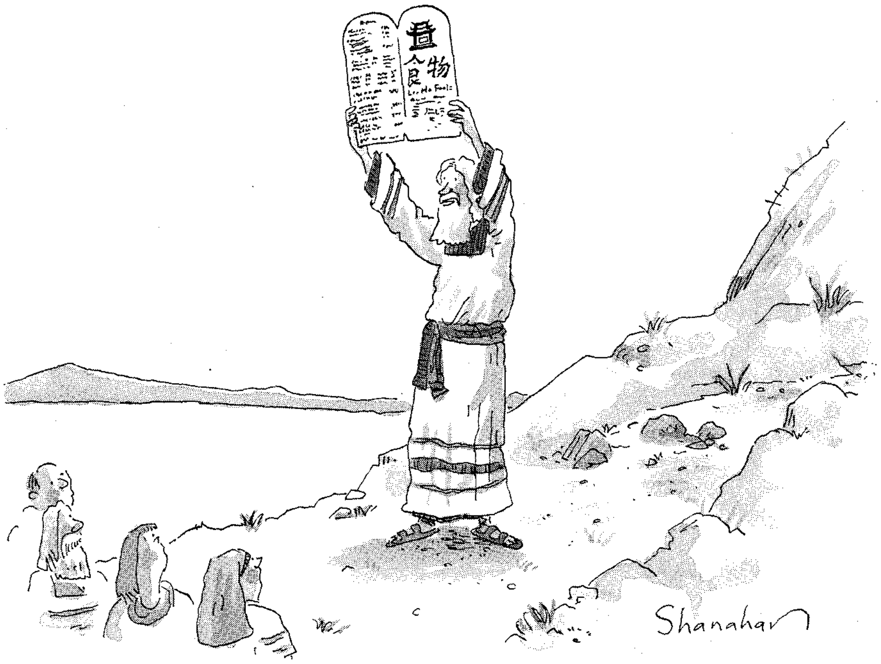
THE FINALISTS

"So what makes you think we need a health inspector?"
Galen Lloyd, Charlottesville, Va.

"Beat it, buddy. We're out of chalk."
Paul Snare, University Place, Wash.

"Seven men walked into a bar and died. What's it to ya?"
Lisa Peters, Minneapolis, Minn.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" ____ "

Today,
GE Healthcare technology will help doctors save nearly 3,000 lives.

Today,
GE power generation equipment will help create a quarter of the world's electricity.

Today,
3.5 million passengers will fly on commercial jets powered by engines from GE and its partners.

Today,
GE Evolution locomotives will save so much fuel, it's like taking 43,000 cars off US roads.

Today,
GE will entertain and inform more than a hundred million people.

Today,
GE water technologies will purify enough water to satisfy the daily needs of 39 million people around the world.

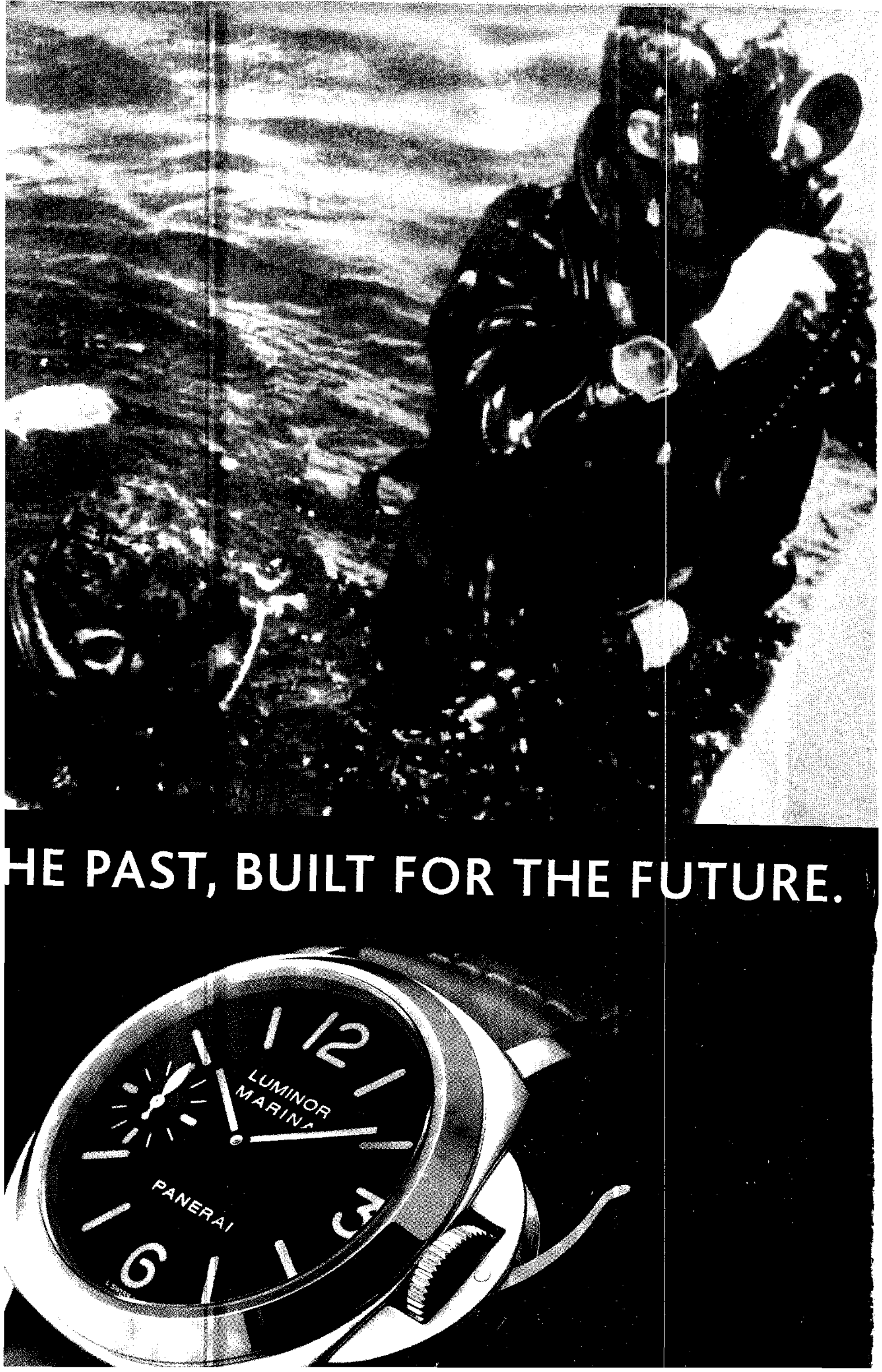
Today,
GE's financial services business will provide $1.85 billion in credit to help companies grow and people reach their dreams.

Today,
More than 300,000 GE employees in over 100 countries are applying their vision, leadership, and hard work to take on the world's toughest challenges.

So just imagine what we'll do
Tomorrow

imagination at work

Jet engine number includes CFM, a GE/Snecma partnership.


HE PAST, BUILT FOR THE FUTURE.
LUMINOR
MARINA
PANERAI
12
3
6